

Blessed is the Flame

an introduction to concentration camp resistance and anarcho-nihilism

Serafinski


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BLESSED IS THE FLAME

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my parents for your support,
my mom for being such a solid research
assistant, and to Amber for helping me find
space in my life to pursue this subject.

Big ups to *Semo Distro* for keeping me immersed
in rad literature, and to *The Armando Del Moro
Library* for your patience with my overdue books.

This book is dedicated to my grandmother, whose
tenacity and strength brought me into this world,
and who continues to inspire me daily.

And to all those living recalcitrant lives.

(And to K, for punching a Nazi in the face
while I was busy writing this.)

Pistols Drawn 2016

Published by Aragorn Moser and Leona Benton
Printed at "The Compound"
1818 Carleton St. Berkeley, CA 94703-1908

The Tower InPrint | www.the-tower.ca/inprint

Cover Art: Natan Nuchi
Chapter Header Art: Hannah Harchol
Map: invisiblecity@riseup.net

COLOPHON

Running heads, body and *italics* set in Sabon 10.5/12, an old-style typeface designed by German typographer, suspected communist and concentration camp survivor Jan Tschichold.

Headers are set in **DIN 1451**, the iconic authoritarian typeface of the German state adopted during the Third Reich's rein and still the face of German signage today.

Page proportions are inspired by the Minor 6th chord, whose dark and sad sound reflects the content of this text.

BLESSED IS THE FLAME

An Introduction to Concentration Camp Resistance & Anarcho-Nihilism

By Serafinski

Pistols Drawı

Blessed is the match consumed
in kindling flame.
Blessed is the flame that burns
in the secret fastness of the heart.
Blessed is the heart with strength to stop
its beating for honor's sake.
Blessed is the match consumed
in kindling flame.

—Hannah Senesh
Jewish partisan fighter

And may the flame that
burns inside us
burn everything around us.

—Panayiotis Argyrou
Proud Member of the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire



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Burning Treblinka II perimeter during the prisoner uprising, 2 August 1943. This clandestine photograph was taken by Franciszek Zabecki


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INTRODUCTION

WE ARE BEING LED TO OUR SLAUGHTER. THIS HAS been theorized in a thousand ways, described in environmental, social, and political terms, it has been prophesied, abstracted, and narrated in real time, and still we are unsure of what to do with it. The underlying point is that the progress of society has nothing to offer us and everything to take away. Often it feels like we are giving it away without a fight: when we sell our time for money, allow our passions to be commodified, invest ourselves in the betterment of society, or sustain ourselves on the spoils of ecological destruction, we openly (though not consensually) participate in our own destruction.

The question hangs in an ethereal and ghastly voice: *Why do you let yourselves be led to the slaughter like sheep*? As Hermann Langbein addresses in *Against All Hope: Resistance in the Nazi Concentration Camps*, the survivors of those most explicit of human slaughter houses have been plagued by that

question for decades, to which some have simply replied: *we didn't*.

What can stories of resistance inside of the Nazi concentration camps teach us about our own situations? How can we relate to the resistance of those immersed in "the most frightful and hopeless struggle the world has ever witnessed?"[2]

Underneath the ubiquitous sheep-to-the-slaughter metaphor is buried a profound historical possibility: wherever the Nazis sought to impose domination and violence, people resisted. Behind the images of people wearing armbands, boarding trains, and walking placidly into gas chambers, lies a rich history of recalcitrance[3] and insurrection. Inside of the Nazi concentration camps, places meticulously designed to subjugate and exterminate human beings, people organized, conspired, sabotaged, and reflexively fought back against their oppressors. Though there are certainly lessons to be taken from World War II about the potential for whole populations to be rendered docile, there are also lessons about what it means to defy

1 Langbein 2

2 Garlinski 158. The occasional use of superlatives throughout this text, as well as my exclusive focus on the Nazi holocaust, is not meant to exceptionalize this particular history above any other experiences of suffering or genocide. History has tragically given us far too many "frightful and hopeless" struggles to play such petty games.

3 "Recalcitrance": Resisting authority or control; not obedient or compliant; hard to manage.

pacification in extraordinarily bleak circumstances. When we forget these kinds of stories, we forget about our own capacities for resistance. This text is about telling those stories and letting them become part of our own struggles.

A different approach: We have already been led to our slaughter—it is all around us. The world in which we exist is a protracted death, a sort of economically-sustained limbo in which hearts are permitted to beat only to the extent that they can facilitate the upward stream of capital. The plague of domestication has reached into every wild space, and the lines of colonization have crossed us more times than we can count. Every unproductive aspect of the biosphere has been flagged for eradication, from the "beam-trawled ocean floors" to the "dynamited reefs" to the "hollowed-out mountains,"[4] the highest calibers of technology are locked into a perpetual killing spree chugging along in a "monotonous rhythm of death."[5] We who still have air in our lungs are the living dead, and struggle daily to remember what it feels like to be alive, holding tightly to the "desire for wildness that the misery of a paycheck cannot allay."[6] We roam the desolate architecture of our slaughter houses ("the prison of civiliza-

4 Dark Mountain 23

5 Goldstein 68. Here Goldstein is describing the endless stream of corpses leaving the Warsaw Ghetto.

6 Zlodey 213

tion we live in") like ghosts who *feel* but cannot quite *understand* the vapidity of our existence. To borrow some apt phrases from the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire (CCF): we have become thoroughly integrated into "a system that crushes us on a daily basis", that "controls our thoughts and our desires through screens" and "teaches us how to be happy slaves" while letting us "consider ourselves free because we can vote and consume", and all the while, "we, like cheerful Sisyphus, are still carrying our slavery stone and think this is life."[8] As an American Iraq war veteran-turned-strategy consultant wrote in the *New York Times* in 2013: "The biggest problem we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is *already dead*."[9] The extent to which we have internalized the rhythms, values, and stories of this civilization "ties our future to [this] undead and all-devouring system."[10]

Then perhaps a better question might be: *Why are we continuously being led to our slaughter like sheep?*, to which many of us simply reply: *We aren't.*

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Anarcho-nihilism

A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority, who does not accept any principle on faith, however much that principle may be revered. –Ivan Turgenev

The anarcho-nihilist[11] position is essentially that we are fucked. That the current manifestation of human society (civilization, leviathan, industrial society, global capitalism, whatever) is beyond salvation, and so our response to it should be one of unmitigated hostility. There are no demands to be made, no utopic visions to be upheld, no political programs to be followed—the path of resistance is one of pure negation. In short, "that conditions in the social organization are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake independent of any constructive program or possibility."[12]

11 I have chosen the phrase anarcho-nihilism to specify the particular collision of anarchist and nihilist thinking. Some believe that nihilism *is* a strain of anarchism (Aragorn!), while others have argued that the anti-capitalist position is inherently nihilist (*Uncontrollable*), both of which render the phrase "anarcho-nihilist" redundant. Phrases like "political nihilism", "strategic nihilism", "conscious nihilism", "anarchist nihilism", "nihilist anarchism", "active nihilism" and "black anarchy" all seem to point towards the moment when nihilism emerges from its ennui to take on the existent. Because I approached nihilism from an anarchist lens, the phrase "anarcho-nihilism" seemed a good fit, though at points, for ease of reading, I have simply referred to this tendency as "nihilism"

12 *Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st Century* 19

Aragorn! traces the history of nihilism to 19th century Russia, where the "suffocating" environment of Tsarism created a breeding ground for a purely negative strain of socialism. What started as a philosophical rejection of conventional morality and aesthetics laid the groundwork for a youth-driven counter-culture of hedonism, communalism, and proto-hipster fashion.[13] This eventually birthed a revolutionary force that sought the absolute destruction of "state traditions, social order, and classes in Russia", not as part of a program for social change, but based on a "deeply-held belief that destruction was worthwhile for its own sake".[14] Though Russian nihilism was eventually squashed by the state, the ideas spread and have recently seen a resurgence within anarchist currents.

After two centuries of failed revolutions, nihilism has perhaps become even more disinterested in conventional socialist programs and radical milieus. It has also been armed with decades of anarchist and post-structuralist theory that have helped to cultivate its critiques of domination, meta-narratives, teleolog-

13 "'Both sexes favoured blue-tinted spectacles and high boots. Other common features were a heavy walking-stick and a rug flung over the shoulders in cold weather; they called it a plaid, but it was not necessarily a tartan.' This, coupled with huge beards for men and bobs for women, a voracious appetite for cigarettes, an unwashed dirty appearance, and rude and outspoken behavior made the New People a sight to behold." (*Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st Century* 7)

14 *Nihilism, Anarchy, and the 21st Century* 8, 12

ical structures, gender, and civilization as a whole. Streams of communiques from anarcho-nihilist groups detailing incendiary actions have been backed by a surge of publications exploring nihilist approaches to the problem of domination in today's world, both of which have led to (occasionally useful) lines of dialogue between nihilists and other anarchists. Though some strains of nihilism certainly arrive at a place of paralysis, the strain that collides with anarchism tends to be one of explosive creativity and relentless action. On the path of negation, anarcho-nihilism spurns positive programs for social change, challenges dominant modes of time, and discovers a tactical freedom by disregarding inherited moralities and political traditions, among other positions.

Collision

We are anarchists not by Bakunin or the CNT,
but by our grandmothers. –Julieta Paredes

I began thinking about this text in Toronto, where my 93 year old grandmother lives on the seventh floor of a high-rise apartment overlooking Highway 401.[15] Standing at the floor-to-ceiling windows in her kitchen, the horizon is swallowed by twelve lanes of concrete and an endless river of traffic, equal parts terrifying and hypnotic. How many gruesome stories

15 Which Wikipedia currently claims to be the busiest and widest stretch of highway in the world!

are written into this one landscape? The concrete road tells the story of the colonization of Turtle Island, the commuter traffic tells the story of mass domestication under the rhythms of capitalism, the billowing smog tells a story of the future that's almost too frightening to believe. Drinking tea quietly, my grandmother is clearly unfazed by this ominous procession—it is the world she now knows and accepts. In a previous chapter of her life she confronted and survived a very different infrastructure of death: as a young adult, the bunkers, factories, and crematorium of Auschwitz defined nearly a year of her life. Her experiences of the Nazi holocaust sit close with me as I look out over this glowing ribbon of death and wrestle with the ideas of nihilism.

To what extent do I remain attached to this society that I despise?

What would it mean to sever those attachments?

If this were Nazi Germany expanding out before me, how would I live my life?

What if I were in my grandmother's position in 1943?

What does it mean to resist against such a catastrophically extensive and overwhelming system?

This collision of anarcho-nihilism and concentration camp resistance came about primarily as a coincidence of literary indulgences. At the same time as I pored my way through *Bæden*, a queer-nihilist journal (still one of the best nihilist text I've encountered), I also

stumbled upon my first memoir of resistance from the Warsaw Ghetto. As so often happens, connections began to jump off the page, and it seemed ideal to pursue these two subjects simultaneously. Since then, I have found that they speak poignantly to one another, and when held together seem to create a stereoscopic depth that has helped me to grapple with the weight of both topics simultaneously.

I'll admit from the outset that I have low ambitions for this project. My intention is not to comprehensively explain, reinvent, or critique nihilism or anarchism more generally. Rather, I want to feel out these ideas and see how far they can take me. Like the authors of the nihilist journal *Attentat*, I am interested in finding "tools, not answers, with an emphasis on building."[16] Similarly, I have no aspirations to shed new light on the Nazi holocaust, or offer any startling new interpretations—despite all of my research, the subject still feels somewhat untouchable: an end to a conversation rather than a beginning. If nothing else, I would like to unearth some stories of resistance that do not often get told, and in doing so, to bring the holocaust into the realm of anarchist thought in a meaningful way so that at least we have *something* to say about it. I hope to open the doors to other anarchists who have a personal connection to these histories, or who share an interest, so that we might incorporate them into our lives in productive ways.

16 *Attentat* 150

At heart, this book is about tapping into the instinctual rebelliousness that resides underneath of every organization, affinity group, project, and action that we participate in; that reflexive spirit of resistance rooted in the basic existential understanding that recalcitrance is simply a more meaningful and joyous form of existence than docility. Too often our insurrectionary urges get bogged down in ideological costume, rhetorical mandate, and hobbyist paradigms. We channel our energies into dubious conduits of prefabricated dogma and inevitably burn out or become listless at the very mention of Revolution[17]. Forms of resistance rooted in social obligations and lifestyle choices all too often fade into lives of despondency, alienation, boredom, or material comfort. It speaks to the very nature of our domestication that we only choose resistance so long as it feels like something we can win.

That's where nihilism enters the picture.

I am interested in the sort of resistance we pursue, not because we necessarily believe it will produce desired changes or lead us into a brighter future, but because it is the most meaningful response to this world we can imagine. Because we simply can't stomach the idea of being passive in the face of a system this brutal, regardless of how far we may be from our dreams. Nihilism urges anarchists to embrace our feelings of cynicism around radical milieus, our feelings

17 A word from which anarcho-nihilism has largely severed itself.

of boredom with prescribed methods of resistance, our feelings of hopelessness in the current landscape of domination, and to engage in forms of revolt that cultivate immediate joy and moments of liberation.

And that's where the Nazi holocaust becomes particularly interesting.

Concentration camp resistance challenges nihilism to consider just how bleak it is willing to get. The resistance of those in the *Lagers*[18] who were deprived of every vestige of hope, every morsel of inspiration, and every shred of comfort, poses rich questions about how much hopelessness we are willing to wade through for a chance to fight back. It reminds us that resistance is not just about getting results, but about our reflexive reactions to oppressive situations. Whether we succeed in overthrowing our oppressors and bringing about a brighter future can only be secondary to the visceral need to rebel against the shitty conditions of our lives.

Both topics—anarcho-nihilism and concentration camp resistance—challenge anarchists to realize a spirit of resistance that can endure horrific conditions, that can weather the storms of absolute futility, and that can still muster an exuberant desire to rebel.

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18 "*Lagers*": Nazi concentration camps.

The Ceaseless Lager

"The Holocaust experience is a very condensed version of most of what life is all about." –Dori Laub

This is not a book about happy endings. Almost every story ends with mass torture, slaughter, and enslavement. When the liberation of the camps occurred it was not because internal resistance had brought the Nazis to their knees, but because of the arrival of a different team of imperial state armies[19]. A typical leftist approach to this topic might try to emphasize the effectiveness of concentration camp resistance, to paint portraits of heroes who hastened the end of the war, or to only celebrate the moments of successful escape. A nihilist approach might be just as content to emphasize all of the times that action accomplished nothing, all of the times that rebel strategies failed, all of the acts of resistance that did not even survive for us to hear about them—to stand back with all of that information and to still be able to say: *that's great!* From a nihilistic approach, we can celebrate the "failures" of resistance, because in them we find a sort of resiliency and substance that may serve us better in our current situations than mere stories of triumph.

Though it would be ludicrous to over-pronounce a comparison between our situations today and the concentration camps of World War II, the institution-

19 See Wayne Price's *The Meaning of World War II* for a useful anarchist interpretation of World War II.

alized brutality and the systematic disempowerment many of us feel certainly resonates. Many of us who experience or at least recognize the horrors of modern society can relate to those before us who were "turned into numbers, deprived of the last vestiges of human dignity, and transformed into totally submissive objects".[20] Most of us alive today experience nothing *near* the brutality of Treblinka; however the mechanisms that were used to subjugate *Häftlinge*[21], the prisons that were used to contain them, and the underlying logic of Nazi Germany that made the camps possible all persist in abundance. Those who have survived the (ongoing) five hundred year colonization of Turtle Island will surely recognize many of these as the same methods used to displace and eradicate their people, and that continue to serve colonial states at their expense. The colonization of this land was, after all, of great personal inspiration to Hitler himself.[22]

For a variety of reasons history has exceptionalized this particular genocide, but I've come to understand it as part of an unbroken continuum of domination that neither began nor ended with Hitler. It's important to remember that the Nazis didn't have to build all of their own camps (some of that work was done by the Social Democratic governments prior), nor

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20 Langbein 2

21 "*Häftlinge*": German for "prisoners", referring throughout this text specifically to concentration camp inmates.

22 Churchill 308

did they have to decommission all of them after the war (the Soviets put a couple of them to good use).[23] Let's also remember that the post-war trials of Nazi doctors were conducted under the explicit understanding that most governments of the world are guilty of perverse, unconsensual human experimentation. Most notably, the United States, from where many of the Nuremberg judges came, had been involved in this kind of brutal scientific experimentation throughout much of the 20th century, infecting prisoners with malaria plasmodia, infecting death row prisoners with pellagra, or testing the effects of nuclear radiation on general populations.[24] The Nazis were only found (or remembered as) guilty because they lost the war. Their camps were not fundamentally unique, though they certainly brought a devastating industrial flair to the whole concept. Giorgio Agamben has aptly argued that the concentration camp is *the* defining feature of modern politics, as it represents a "site of exception" from the enlightened facade of civilized society.[25] Indeed, everywhere we look today we see Nazi machinations at work, though these parallels are often too controversial to utter. And yet for those willing to see it, from the Gaza strip to the Toronto Immigration Holding Centre, from the factory farms to the Alberta Tar Sands, the logic of this civilization

23 Agamben 167
24 Agamben 157-159
25 *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*

continues to show its true colors. In order for some to live safely, others must be declared *Ballastexistenzen*[26] and be shackled, violated, and killed. In order for humans to thrive, the earth and all of its other inhabitants must be subjugated and ravaged. Although the uniforms have changed and the tactics have evolved, the same basic struggle against domination continues. The phrase "never again", repeated often by victims and descendants of the Nazi holocaust, rings more and more hollow with every passing moment.[27]

26 Hitler's preferred term for the "undesirable and unnecessary" members of society.

27 Huge respect to those holocaust survivors who have transformed their experiences into solidarity with other oppressed peoples, particularly with Palestinians. Reuven Moskovitz, who broke the Gaza blockade, said: "It is a sacred duty for me as a survivor to protest against the persecution, the oppression, and the imprisonment of so many people in Gaza, including more than 800,000 children… .I as a Holocaust survivor cannot live with the fact that the State of Israel is imprisoning an entire people behind fences."



INTRODUCTION TO CONCENTRATION CAMP RESISTANCE

Nobody knows themselves. Sometimes when somebody is really nice to me I find myself thinking, "How will he be in Sobibór?" –Toivi Blatt

Absolute Subjugation

TO PROVIDE A QUICK OVERVIEW OF THE NAZI CONcentration camps is an overwhelming challenge, and so I will limit my scope here to the topic at hand: resistance, and specifically the conditions for its emergence. This approach is important for understanding the context in which resistance happened, but also for understanding the context in which so much resistance didn't happen. As mentioned earlier, debates around passivity and "sheep-like" obedience have dominated discussions of the Nazi holocaust. An essay on resistance within the camps risks playing into a narrative that once again casts shame or criticism on those who

did not fight back, a narrative I refuse to indulge.[1] Of those who were able to survive abduction, transport, and arrival in the camps, a deftly-designed universe of extreme demoralization, physical duress, and social alienation awaited them. The camps were "designed to break the will of the inmate"[2], to "shatter the adversaries' capacity to resist"[3], and as one survivor of Auschwitz wrote: "it would have been impossible to create worse conditions for resistance, a more perverse and brutal system."[4] The camps were so ordered against resistance that merely to lift one's hand in defense of an incoming blow was considered a grievous act of defiance, worthy of torturous execution.[5] Nazi methodology was deftly crafted to reduce humans to sheep-like creatures, an experiment most explicitly pursued in their laboratories where scientists busied themselves with the task of physically rendering Jews into a race of sterile, "animal-like creatures who would be adapted solely for work".[6] Though these experiments largely failed (with grisly results), the broader

1 I hold fast to Adelaide Hautval's caution: "I don't think anybody in the world today has the right to judgment or decision as to what he himself would have done in those completely improbable conditions with which one stood face to face in places like Auschwitz."

2 Ress 6

3 Jan van Pelt 564

4 Garlinski 38

5 Laska 212; Langbein 52

6 Garlinksi 132

experiment in the camps of creating the conditions for absolute subjugation was disturbingly successful.

So successful were these techniques that even in the most aggravating circumstances imaginable, people often found themselves totally incapable of resistance. The totality of this subjugation is conveyed in the crushing testimonies of those who experienced it: Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel listened to his own father cry out for him while being beaten to death, yet was unable to muster a response.[7] Filip Müller painfully watched as 4,000 Auschwitz inmates knowingly walked into the gas chambers despite the prolonged efforts of some to agitate them into resistance.[8] Tadeusz Borowski recalls working alongside 10,000 workers when a truck full of naked women slowly rolled by calling out for help: "'Save us! We are going to the gas chambers! Save us!'... Not one of us made a move, not one of us lifted a hand."[9] These testimonies are powerful gestures towards the depravity of the "concentration universe" and the extent to which it violently precluded the potential for defiance. These are not stories of individual passivity—they are stories of systematic disempowerment.

7 Wiesel 111
8 Jan van Pelt 583-5
9 Jan van Pelt 566

Precluding Resistance

Perhaps more than anything else, the physical conditions of the *Lagers* played a role in the suppression of defiance. An explication of this sort could be long and brutal, but suffice it to say that being kept forever on the brink of starvation, worked beyond the capacities of the human body, exposed daily to wanton acts of cruelty, subjected to year-round elemental onslaught, and being perpetually enveloped in pestilence and disease, has the capacity to turn human bodies into emaciated shells devoid of will power or physical strength. Throughout survivor testimonies, starvation is the most frequently cited obstacle to resistance. One survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, Marek Edelman, annoyed with perpetual questions about the passivity of those who boarded trains bound for death camps, explained to his interviewer: "Listen… do you have any idea what bread meant at the time in the Ghetto? Because if you don't, you will never understand how thousands of people could voluntarily come for the bread and go on to the camp at Treblinka. Nobody has understood thus far."[10] Vera Laska, a survivor of Auschwitz and editor of *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, reflects on the significance of bread in the camps:

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10 Edelman 21

> I have seen with my own eyes in Auschwitz an SS man enter the barracks of 1,450 women, throw chunks of bread into their midst and then step back in a fit of laughter as hundreds of women pushed and shoved, clawed and fought for the crumbs. Within minutes, three women were trampled to death and dozens injured.[11]

Though we may recoil learning about situations like this, most of us will never really know what it feels like to be so systematically deprived of food; thus our exploration of this topic must always be guided by the deepest humility for the hunger that we can read about but never truly know.

Another central aspect of the camps that devastated potential for resistance was the Nazi strategy of cultivating social alienation, intended "to reduce all inmates to monads."[12] By creating conditions that demanded brute self-interest, where groups and individuals were pitted against each other for scraps of privilege, where the pain of isolation was preferable to the weight of empathy, the Nazis were able to preclude the capacity for solidarity, and thus the capacity for much resistance. One of the primary tools in this endeavor was a deeply divisive social structure that

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11 Laska 186

12 Jan van Pelt 567. "Monad": a single-celled organism, a totally separated entity.

pitted inmates against each other. Upon entry into the camps, inmates were put into an identity category demarcated by a colored triangle ("*winkel*"), that would henceforth impact every moment of their existence. Criminal prisoners (mainly Germans) wore green winkels, political prisoners (e.g. communists, anarchists, etc.) wore red, Jehovah's Witnesses wore violet, male homosexuals wore pink, "anti-socials" (e.g. Romas, mentally ill, lesbians, etc.) wore black, and Jews wore the dreaded yellow star.[13] These triangles were sometimes elaborated by marked letters indicating a person's country of origin, which also had deep implications for how one would be treated in the camp. The arbitrary organization of these identity categories into a violently enforced hierarchy defined social life in the *Lagers*, and served to undermine solidarity between inmates. Hannah Arendt observed that in the camps, "the gruesome and grotesque part of it was that the inmates identified themselves with these categories, as though they represented a last authentic remnant of their juridical person."[14] Because these identity categories came to be so internalized and cherished by the inmates, connections between inmates were inherently governed by Nazi strategy.

The differential treatment of these artificial groupings created deep fissures between prisoners. "Greens" were often tasked with running the camps

13 Garlinski 33
14 Jan van Pelt 563

as Senior Inmates (responsible for the operation of a particular section of the camp) and *Capos* (heads of labour crews).[15] Because an ordinary prisoner was "completely at the mercy of his *Capo* and senior block inmate", the character traits of these functionaries often determined one's chances for both survival and resistance.[16] Beneath these in the hierarchy were other "prominent" positions that offered opportunities for non-lethal labor, extra food rations, or other privileges. Competition for prominent positions was fierce (literally life or death), and such assignments could only be kept by appeasing the SS officers who appointed them. Those who attained prominent positions held them tenaciously, which under the gaze of Nazi officers tended to evoke a certain level of sadism. Overall, the internal hierarchy of the camp fostered an atmosphere of brutal mistrust, competition, and resentment. Newcomers were usually met with outright hostility by fellow inmates, alongside the physical and verbal abuse of the guards.[17] Primo Levi describes how debilitating his first encounter with this atmosphere of prisoner hostility was: "This brusque revelation, which became manifest from the very first hours of imprisonment… was so harsh as to cause the immediate collapse of one's capacity to resist."[18]

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15 Langbein 25
16 Langbein 26
17 *Survival in Auschwitz* 39
18 *The Drowned and The Saved* 38

While some echelons of this social hierarchy had hopes of survival and/or upward mobility, others had none. Across the entire system of camps it was universally true that Jews held the lowest rung. For them there were generally no prominent positions available or privileges to be earned; for them there was only death and the hostility and resentment of those around them for the space they occupied, the food they consumed, and the hopelessness they represented.[19] As Joseph Garlinski describes the Jews' situation in Auschwitz, their horrid and short lives within the camps combined with their multilingual, multinational makeup as a group, "limited any possibility of clandestine work among [them] and decreased the chances of their forming a strong underground group in the camp."[20] Russians generally occupied the second lowest rung of the camp, and in situations where they weren't immediately killed, were rarely able to gain prominent positions or form lasting networks.[21] Men marked with a pink triangle were often the subject of sexual violence, and thus occupied their own unique and vicious echelon of the camp hierarchy—to even speak with a "pink" was a risky affair, which meant

19 Though in the later years of the war the sheer volume of inmates and the heightened demand for workers resulted in some Jews attaining prominent positions.

20 Garlinski 171

21 Langbein 159

they faced an added layer of isolation.[22] Thus we can begin to see that enormous disparity existed in the privilege of different inmates, and had substantial implications for the capacity and willingness of different prisoners to resist.

These assaults on the body and mind were combined with a relentless war on the spirit; demoralization was a daily responsibility of the *Capos* and the SS, who used humiliation, misinformation, and extreme isolation to obliterate any sense of agency. The Nazis intentionally crafted a universe that was severed from the rest of the world and that was deeply shrouded in the myth of the Thousand-Year Reich. To even speak about the war in some camps was a grievous crime, and so Nazi propaganda about the "blitzkrieg" (lightning-fast war) reigned supreme.[23] Inmates had no reliable reason to believe that anyone knew where they were, that anyone was coming to help, or that anyone would ever find out what had happened to them in these terrible places. (We should always remember the Nazis in fact came astonishingly close to covering up many aspects of their extermination project, and it is only because of the committed work of rebellious inmates that the world learned details of what transpired in the camps.[24]) Organizers quickly learned

22 Meers 13; Müller 178. Müller makes reference to the *piepels*, or Bum-boys, who "served the pleasures" of those above them.

23 Langbein 81

24 Rashke 2; Garlinski 219

that "people are more likely to transcend themselves if they know that the public will be informed of their actions", and as a result, establishing lines of communication with the outside world was often a central priority.[25]

Lastly, daily life within the camps was intended to overwhelm and disempower the inmates with cruel, often bizarre and inscrutable laws and practices. Primo Levi informs us that the rules governing life in the camps were "infinite and senseless," in addition to the guidelines around work, which were themselves "a Gordian knot of laws, taboos, and problems."[26] These irrational elements of Nazi control created an environment in which, as one German guard explained to Levi: *"hier ist kein warum"—there is no why here.*[27] This was a universe in which the SS would often provide costly health care to one of their torture victims only to send them to the gas chambers upon recovery, and in which workers would be ordered to carry bricks up stairs in an assembly line and then jump out

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25 Langbein 53. Hannah Arendt applied this concept to totalitarian states in general: "Totalitarian domination as a form of government. . . bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man," (Jan van Pelt 560).

26 *Survival in Auschwitz* 33-4

27 *Survival in Auschwitz* 29. This interaction occurred when Levi, parched and starving, reached his hand out of a transport train to grab an icicle that might assuage his thirst. A guard ran over to knock the icicle out of his hand for no explicable reason.

of a window to gather more bricks (whoever broke bones would be hospitalized, healed, and then sent to the gas chambers)[28]. This was a universe in which the number of buttons on one's jacket must always be five, beds (made mostly of wood and lice) had to be perfectly made every morning, and in which one's capacity to choose an appropriately fitting wooden shoe at an "eye's glance" might determine chances for another day of survival.[29] The innumerable strange and contradictory aspects of camp life reinforced the absoluteness of Nazi control, and further obliterated the agency and morale of the inmates.

The Conditions for Resistance

From all lairs of meanness and insidiousness the depraved vermin comes crawling and cozies up to the SS, blissfully betraying their acquaintances and friends, opponents, and human dignity itself. The golden age of unprincipled persons has dawned.
–Pierre Gregoire(who fell victim to an informant in *Sachsenhausen).*

For those few individuals who were able (and lucky enough) to survive these conditions *and* maintain both the will and physical capacity to resist, an entirely new world of complications and obstacles awaited. One of the most debilitating mechanisms employed by the

28 *Survival in Auschwitz* 56
29 *Survival in Auschwitz* 34

SS to discourage resistance was a policy of "collective responsibility," whereby any act of revolt, sabotage, or escape was met with brutal punishment, not only for those involved, but for an arbitrary selection of other inmates. Witold Pilecki, who established the first resistance organization in Auschwitz, learned this system of collective responsibility harshly upon his entry into the camp: Before entering the front gates, a prisoner was chosen at random and told to run to a post at the side of the road—"Ten men were then dragged out of the ranks at random and shot with pistols as 'collective responsibility' for the 'escape,' which the SS themselves has staged."[30] This lesson was further reinforced when, a month after Pilecki arrived at the camp, one prisoner was absent from a morning roll call, which sparked an SS commander to order a "penal stand-at-attention" for the entire camp that lasted eighteen hours on a bitterly cold, sleeting day, and involved relentless beatings from the SS.[31] This punishment killed approximately two hundred inmates, and several hundred more were hospitalized.[32] Standard policy in Aushwitz would later

30 Pilecki 14

31 Pilecki 66. The missing prisoner was Tadeusz Wiejowski, who had escaped from the then-primitive walls of Auschwitz, but was rearrested the following year and shot.

32 One of the prisoner doctors, who provided treatment to the relentless barrows of inmates that day, recalls how terrible it was to "see these men, comatose, half-conscious, crawling, reeling like drunks, babbling incoherently and with difficulty, covered with spittle and foaming at the mouth, dying, gasping out their last

become that for every escapee, ten prisoners would be locked in dark cells without food or water until they died or the escapee returned.[33] Sometimes the fugitive's family would be arrested and brought into the camp. These policies deeply complicated any acts of resistance for obvious ethical reasons, and resulted in some resistance groups implementing a 'no-escape' policy to prevent such outlandish retributions.[34] Outside of Auschwitz, partisan fighters[35] enacted a 'no-shoot' policy in the vicinity of the camp for the same reasons.

Another impediment that awaited would-be resisters was the Nazi's prized networks of informants. The Political Department of the SS maintained elaborate webs of snitches (called "Special Commissions") throughout each camp, which were all too easy to establish within the internally hostile and competitive social fabric. Starving, isolated, and petrified inmates were often faced with a choice between cooperation or torturous execution. Garlinski explains:

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breath," (Garlinski 25).

33 Langbein 89

34 Garlinski 68; Langbein 89. In December 1942, due to the overwhelming need for workers, the policy of collective responsibility was eased and resistance groups began to organize escapes (Garlinski 141).

35 Partisan fighters were bands of anti-Nazi militants who fought from behind enemy lines and occasionally conspired with concentration camp resistance organizations. Often those who escaped from the camps joined the partisans.

> In such a brutal struggle for life, with no quarter given, where for many any trick was legitimate if it were to one's own advantage, the *average* level of honesty and comradeship was bound to be low. The informers were recruited from various nationalities; they were on every Block, almost in every *Kommando*.[36]

Other inmates became snitches of their own initiative in hopes of currying favour or privilege. These networks of informants were tasked not only with weeding out members of resistance organizations, but also with aggravating existing tensions between groups, or with agitating existing ideological differences within groups.[37] The SS even went as far as to set up a "snitch-box" in the middle of Auschwitz where inmates could anonymously rat each other out.[38] This intense concentration of informants in the camps, combined with the policy of collective responsibility, crushed some resistance activities and dissuaded others from even trying.

And still...

In spite of these and a host of other factors that destroyed almost any possibility of resistance, we are nevertheless faced with a rich history of sabotage, in-

36 Garlinski 132

37 Langbein 215.

38 Garlinski 133

surrection, mutual aid, escape, spontaneous defiance, and underground organization within the camps. Inmates overcame social isolation to form deep bonds and endured unfathomable material conditions to bear witness to what they had seen. They rebelled despite the brutal repercussions and orchestrated escapes against all odds. Resistance organizations even managed to mitigate the impacts of the Special Commissions by developing security cultures that were nearly impenetrable. They functioned in such secrecy that "even in camps where a resistance organization was active for years, the overwhelming majority of prisoners knew nothing about it."[39] Informants were frequently killed by rebels, through mock trials in hidden rooms, swift force, or covert assassination. In one case, castor oil was put into an informant's soup, and when admitted to the hospital he was given a lethal injection by a doctor who was part of the resistance.[40] In another case, an informant's X-RAY plates were secretly switched with those of a tuberculosis patient, which meant that he was soon given lethal injection by the SS themselves.[41] The best-known *Gestapo* informer in Auschwitz was given a sweater containing typhus-in-

39 Langbein 56

40 Garlinski 135

41 Garlinski 135. When word of this tactic caught on, the Political Department instituted a new policy that all lethal injections be cleared with them, so as to prevent assassination of their precious informants.

fected lice that killed him within weeks.[42] Sometimes the organizations were able to use social manipulation to have the informant stripped of their privileges and removed from the special commissions.[43] In Auschwitz, resisters quickly gained access to the snitch-box by making an imprint of the key on a loaf of bread and forging a replica, allowing them to manipulate what information the SS had access to and to uncover informants in their midst.[44] And, despite the most brutal torture methods employed by the SS, members of the resistance seem to have rarely snitched on each other after being caught: phrases such as "however, he gave no one away," and "the interrogation proved fruitless" are repeated frequently throughout the literature.[45]

Rather than dwell on the question of passivity during the holocaust, I am inclined to celebrate the fact that any resistance happened at all! Alongside the deeply misanthropic and depressing insights we might gleam from the camps, there is also a great deal for us to cherish. For all of us who have witnessed our own resistance networks stifled by state surveillance,

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42 Garlinski 135

43 Langbein 216. In Sachsenhausen, for instance, one particularly insidious informant named Kuhnke was tactically disempowered by the resistance group, who were able to exploit disagreements among the SS in such a way that Kuhnke was removed from his position and beaten severely, ending the terrible period of the special commission in that camp.

44 Garlinski 133

45 Wasowicz 98; Garlinski 240

interpersonal conflict, hopelessness, and the material strain of keeping food on the table, the *Lagers* provide proof that even in the most overwhelming situations people can still find creative and sustained ways to fight back. Just as *Häftlinge* were marked with badges to create artificial echelons within the camps, we too carry badges of imposed social division in such forms as gender, race, and class that function to keep us squabbling over scraps of privilege. That people were able to overcome those violently-imposed divisions and move beyond struggles for better representation within the camp hierarchy should speak volumes to our own lives. And just as organizers in the camps were able to defy the Special Commissions and develop tight security cultures to keep themselves safe, so too can we find ways to combat the unending policies of infiltration and COINTELPRO-style neutralization tactics that we are up against.

While much could be said on specific definitions of resistance, in the realm of concentration camps, I tend to agree with the broadest definitions offered: "Everything could be treated as resistance because everything was prohibited. Any activity which created the impression that the prisoner had retained some of his former personality and individuality was an act of resistance."[46] Activities such as mutual aid, individual escape, charity, friendship, medical aid, cultural contri-

46 Wasowicz 52

butions (religious gatherings, education, sports, music, etc.), refusal of work, saving lives, and communication with the outside world all represent invaluable acts of resistance in a situation that fostered selfishness and subjugation. Rochelle Saidel, in her book *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, spends five pages discussing the importance of sharing recipes as a clandestine activity, and another three pages discussing the importance of poetry and song—forms of resistance that allowed inmates to persevere through unimaginable trauma. More than anything, to survive and to bear witness to the camps was perhaps the most significant act of resistance against a system that worked so fiendishly to cover its own tracks. Nevertheless, this text focuses on those acts that were geared towards the negation of the camps, rather than the innumerable efforts that allowed people, in one way or another, to survive them. In keeping with the anarcho-nihilist tendency, this essay is about those who attacked. In each of the following sections, one form of concentration camp resistance will be paired with an exploration of anarcho-nihilist ideas: Acts of sabotage are paired with an introduction to nihilism and the concepts of *negation* and *jouissance*; spontaneous acts of resistance are paired with a discussion of time; and mass uprisings are paired with a critique of anarchist organizing. These pairings are meant to complement, though certainly not define, each other. I approached them as juxtapositions more than dialogues, though where relevant I have made space for cross-chatter

between the two subjects. Once again, this project is intended as an introduction to two topics that I feel resonate very strongly, and is less focused on explicating those connections. In that spirit, my own analysis has largely taken a back seat to the task of untangling and organizing a wide range of materials on two difficult subjects. It is my hope that within each act of concentration camp resistance, we can find a simmering spirit of anarcho-nihilism and an opportunity to deepen our understanding of what it might mean for us to resist despite overwhelming feelings of futility.



SABOTAGE AND PURE NEGATION

Sabotage is like wine! –Slogan among Polish women in Ravensbrück

OF ALL THE METHODS OF RESISTANCE EMPLOYED by inmates of concentration camps throughout World War II, my favourite to read about are the relentless acts of sabotage that plagued Hitler's war efforts. While much of the work assigned to inmates early in the war was intended solely as punishment (e.g. moving bags of sand back and forth), after the spring of 1942, the camps became a prime source of slave labour for nearby factories that supplied Germany's army.[1] Descriptions of the work that occurred within these factories paints a picture of an international circus of neglect, ineptitude, laziness, and outright stupidity—masks for what were in fact outrageously brave acts of sabotage

1 Wasowicz 243

against the Nazi war machine. Using a wide array of creative approaches, some more blunt than others, the inmates were able to botch their jobs, demonstrating to the Germans that slavery is simply not a reliable source of quality labor. Many of these acts were spontaneous, while others were part of organized campaigns; all were geared towards the pure negation of Nazism. Although sabotage certainly caused headaches for the Nazis and may have even hastened the end of the war, for *Häftlinge* whose lives were dominated by a second-to-second battle for survival, these acts brought only a heightened level of danger and little personal hope of survival. It is not the outcome of the act, but the moment of action itself that speaks loudest here. For many, the opportunity to step outside of the role of victim for even a fleeting moment, the chance to hit back in whatever way possible, outweighed the risks of such actions. After providing a broad overview of some of the sabotage that took place, this book will take its first detailed look at anarcho-nihilism. The nihilist concepts of *negation* and *jouissance* resonate deeply with these acts of sabotage, offering a framework through which we might think about acts of resistance not as a means of liberation, but as acts of liberation in themselves.

Like any act of resistance, sabotage within the camps and factories was an incredibly risky venture. The SS pursued a number of strategies to prevent and dissuade anything that would get in the way of seamless production and orderly labour lines. The crudest strategy was of course blunt violence: anyone who even raised suspicions of sabotage was met with swift and brutal repercussions. In some situations, saboteurs "pretended to be slow on the uptake" and were spared their lives, though even well-feigned stupidity usually resulted in being beaten almost to death or being hung outside of the factory.[2] On the other end of the spectrum, the Nazis experimented with "premiums," petty benefits offered to inmates who showed high productivity.[3] To aid in these anti-saboteur efforts, the Political Department developed intense networks of informants throughout the factories to expose and dissuade saboteurs, turning the factories into "a jungle of stool pigeons and agent provocateurs" that led to countless executions.[4] When these tactics failed to produce the desired results, Hitler himself implemented a desperate measure that replicated the tactics of "shared responsibility" against his own valuable workforce: wherever production lines lagged to a suspicious degree, and wherever

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2 Langbein 307

3 Langbein 303. At least two camps, Dora and Ravensbrück, saw mass refusals of these premiums from inmates.

4 Langbein 315

defective products were found in suspicious quantities, every tenth prisoner in that factory would be shot.[5] Despite these bloody efforts, there were "reports from practically all camps about acts of sabotage by inmates forced to work on the production of weapons, and it is certain that many acts went unrecorded."[6] Fliers spread throughout occupied Europe with the phrase "Work Slow" tagged across an image of a turtle, while slogans were developed within camps to further spread this mentality, such as Buchenwald's, "Whoever works more slowly will reach peace more quickly," or Sachsenhausen's less catchy, "Work slowly, produce substandard articles, waste materials, cause machines to break down."[7] In short, sabotage became an ingrained part of the work ethic of concentration camps.

Sabotage in the Lagers

To begin, some acts of sabotage were targeted directly at the modes of production within the Nazi war economy: steel plates used for constructing tanks were "mysteriously" buried under rubble, key materials were "misplaced," tools and bricks were "accidentally" damaged, and perfectly good airplane motors were deemed damaged and sent to the junk yard.[8] Entire

5 Langebein 316
6 Langbein 304
7 Wasowicz 245; Langbein 307
8 Langbein 304-5

stockpiles of ammunition were dumped into lakes, shipments of fuel were poured out onto the ground, and salt was added to gunpowder by the women of Ravensbrück, rendering it useless.[9] In Flöha, French engineers constructed excessively-heavy airplane wings that would pass inspection but certainly cause problems in the air.[10] In Auschwitz, women sabotaged the production of plant-based rubber by simply burning half of the harvested seeds.[11] Ships coming out of the Jastram engine factory were improperly welded, grenades coming out of a factory near Auschwitz failed to explode, and machine guns produced by inmates of Mauthausen were completely dysfunctional.[12] Rockets produced in Dora had inexplicable quantities of urine in the electronic components, courtesy of the Russian inmates.[13] In 1943, a Polish inmate named Jan Szot was able to sabotage large quantities of anti-aircraft missiles by shifting the precise alignment of the detonators ever so slightly, resulting in two month's worth of faulty weapons.[14]

The website degob.org documents testimonials from Hungarians who survived the Nazi holocaust, and includes the otherwise-unpublished stories of at

9 Wasowics 247, 250
10 Langbein 305
11 Wasowicz 246
12 Langbein 306-308
13 Langbein 312
14 Wasowicz 246

least a dozen survivors who engaged in sabotage while in the camps. Mária Jakobovics recalls her crew's habitual sabotage of the production of oil-bombs: "We sabotaged whenever we could by simply not inserting the fuses into the bombs. When they realized it we of course got twenty five blows with a club, but we would still do it nonetheless."[15] One woman who was put to work in Auschwitz fixing the piles of clothes taken from incoming Jews reports: "We sabotaged work in a way that we made clothes unusable on purpose."[16] A woman at Bolzenburg who was put to work in an airplane factory reports: "We sabotaged work in whatever ways we could. We broke the drills, presses, and everything that could appear to have happened by accident."[17]

Because some inmates were put to work as bureaucrats, a great deal of sabotage could be accomplished from behind a desk with nothing more than the stroke of a pen. With this method unskilled workers were deemed experts and sent to do important work on the factory line, while those with valuable skills were sent to dig trenches.[18] On the other hand, skilled workers who could be trusted to do sabotage work were handpicked for specific jobs

15 DEGOB: Protocol 588
16 DEGOB: Protocol 407
17 DEGOB Protocol 704
18 Langbein 305

in which they could cause maximum damage.[19] A third tactic involved fudging roll-call numbers such that some inmates were simply overlooked by the SS and spared from work for days at a time.[20] In at least one situation, a doctor falsely diagnosed an entire work crew with typhus in order to have them all put on quarantine and delay the delivery of an urgent order of weapons.[21]

Organized sabotage efforts often united people of different nationalities and political ideologies towards a common goal. In one case, two dozen inmates who established a Polish-Russian-German sabotage group at a mine in Jaszowice, "tore the conveyor belts, hid the tips of mining drills, and, instead of coal, loaded stones."[22] In another case, four hundred Russian and German political prisoners working at the Heinkel-Werke aircraft plant conspired to use magnetized wires to disorient plane navigation systems. The workers were able to sabotage an entire fleet of aircraft without the inspectors finding any faults: "out of a total of one hundred twenty aircraft assembled, not a single one was fit for use."[23] In some cases, organized sabotage efforts were successful in creating larger-scale disruptions by undermining entire infrastructure proj-

19 Langbein 305
20 Langbein 306
21 Langbein 306
22 Wasowicz 247
23 Wasowicz 249

ects. In the spring of 1942, when the crematorium at Dachau was deemed unfit, the camp management ordered a larger one to be built complete with its own ovens and gas chamber. The German *Capo* in charge of the project was a communist, and intent on hindering the construction effort. His instruction to the workers was to the tune of: "Comrades, the gas chamber through which all of us may be intended to march must never be finished! Work slowly? No, sabotage whatever you can!"[24] Though they did complete the crematorium, the "cement did not bond properly, the foundation turned out to be too weak, and the mortar in the brickwork crumbled so that the whole unit had to be torn down and put up again."[25] The second construction was rushed, and the SS were forced to abandon the extra gas chamber.

24 Langbein 304
25 Langbein 304

Pure Negation

The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too! –Mikhail Bakunin

It is ridiculous to even contemplate co-existing with this fascist apparatus. It all has to be destroyed to start afresh. We will taste the fruits from the trees we've grown ourselves in the ashes of their empire.
–Anonymous, *Incitement to Burn*

The call from Bakunin to embrace the destructive urge forms the backbone of both anarchist and anarcho-nihilist thought. The latter takes this axiom and runs with it, arguing that in the face of global systems of domination our sole aim should be to destroy all that constitutes those systems. This stands in direct contrast to other anarchist tendencies that place at least some emphasis on "positive programs"—aspirations to construct something ideal in the present world or to craft plans in preparation for the downfall of the current system. Anarcho-nihilism understands the positive program as "one that confuses desire with reality and extends that confusion into the future" by either making promises about what a revolutionary future might hold, or attempting to bring those conditions about from within the existing order.[26] Such positive aspirations offer nothing

26 *Anarchy and Nihilism: Consequences* 13

more than a dangling carrot for us to pursue in a situation in which the stick, string, and prize all need to be destroyed. The example of those living under Nazi rule illustrates a situation in which, for those deemed *Ballastexistenzen*, positive visions were unfathomable: establishing long-term projects or alternative infrastructure would be ludicrous, except to the extent that they facilitated the destruction of the existing order. So long as Hitler reigned, no Jewish commune would be tolerated, no anarchist child-care collective could ever hope to thrive. To be immersed in a social order as violent and controlling as Nazi Germany warranted a reaction of absolute hostility, attacks aimed at every level of society—pure negation. So too does anarcho-nihilism understand the existing order of today as without potential for a positive agenda. Whatever we build within its bounds will be co-opted, destroyed, or turned against us: "We understand that only when all that remains of the dominant techno-industrial-capitalist system is smouldering ruins, is it feasible to ask *what next*?"[27] According to this line of thought, our situation today is similar to the Lagers to the extent that positive projects, attempts to create a new world in the shell of the old, are simply out of place. Aragorn! writes: "Nihilism states that it is not useful to talk about the society you 'hold in your stomach', the things you would do 'if only you got power'. . .What is useful

27 *325: An Insurgent Zine of Social War and Anarchy* 20

is the negation of the existing world."[28] Similarly, imprisoned members of the CCF write:

> We anarcho-nihilists ...don't talk about 'transformation of social relations' towards a more liberated view, we promulgate their total destruction and absolute annihilation. Only through total destruction of the current world of power... will it be possible to build something new. The deeper we destroy, the more freely will we be able to build.[29]

The visions that rebels tend to entertain about what life will be like After The Revolution are not only unproductive, they are dangerous because they presume that a unified vision of life is desirable. Such forward-looking conversations attempt to herd an infinite spectrum of possibilities onto an ideal anarchist path. The CCF write:

> Very often, even in anarchist circles, the future organization of 'anarchist' society is discussed along with the role of work, self-management of the means of production, direct democracy, etc. According to us, this kind of debate and proposal looks

28 *Nihilism, Anarchy and the 21st Century* 18

29 *A Conversation Between Anarchists* 23

> like the construction of a dam that tries to control the impetus of the abundant stream of Anarchy.[30]

Even resisters in the concentration camps sometimes concerned themselves with this kind of political fantasizing: In Buchenwald, for instance, three underground political organizations banded together in 1944 to plan out the future governance of Germany, at a time when other organizations in the camp were focused on saving lives and staging coordinated resistance.[31] Nihilism urges us to consider the fact that such forward planning is simply unnecessary and that it obfuscates our more urgent goal of negation: "There's no need to know what's happening tomorrow to destroy a today that makes you bleed."[32]

From the foundation of this critique, nihilism identifies a common trap experienced by anarchists: the magnetic compulsion to identify ourselves positively within society even though we strive for its destruction. In my local context, this often looks like anarchists responding to critics of property destruction with reminders of all that we contribute to society (when we are not rioting, we are community organizers, Food Not Bombs chefs, musicians, etc.).

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30 *A Conversation Between Anarchists* 22

31 Wasowicz 119

32 *In Cold Blood* 10

Negation, however, is justified by the existence of a ruling order, not by our credentials as activists. Our riots are justified not because we contribute, but because we exist under the heel of a monstrous society. Positive projects are the means of surviving within that order; negation is the project of destroying it completely. As Alejandro de Acosta reminds us, we must not be tempted to "frame destructive action as having any particular goal beyond destruction of the existent."[33] *Bæden* too rails against this tendency, insisting that we have nothing to gain from hiding our true intentions:

> We understand destruction to be necessary and we desire it in abundance. We have nothing to gain through shame or lack of confidence in these desires. This world… must be annihilated in every instance, all at once. To shy away from this task, to assure our enemies of our good intentions, is the most crass dishonesty.[34]

When we call ourselves anarchists, or even "anti-capitalists," we are implying a commitment to the destruction of systems of domination—why do we so often shy away from this? Nihilism unabashedly embraces negation as being at the core of such positions.

33 De Acosta 9-10
34 *Bæden* Vol. I 12-13

Jouissance

Despite its gloomy connotations, the commitment to pure negation finds its most interesting manifestations as a joyful, creative, and limitless project. Most notably, *Bæden* utilizes the French word jouissance,[35] which directly translates to "enjoyment," but takes on a variety of connotations related to "uncivilized desire," those aspects of our existence which "escape representation," a "shattering of identity and law," and that which "shatters our subjective enslavement to capitalist civilization."[36] Jouissance is an ecstatic energy, felt but never captured, that pushes us away from any form of domination, representation, or restraint, and compels us towards fierce wildness and unmitigated recalcitrance. It is "the process that momentarily sets us free from our fear of death" and which manifests as a "blissful enjoyment of the present," or a "joy which we cannot name."[37] Jouissance is the richness of life evoked by resistance, the spirit that allowed Mária Jakobovics to continue her acts of sabotage despite the sting of the club or the threat of the noose, and the spirit that perhaps allows many of us to lead lives of resistance in absolutely overwhelming circumstances. It is the visceral experience of negation as ecstatic liberation.

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35 A word that also has a strong history in Lacanian psychoanalsysis, poststructuralism, and feminist theory.

36 *Bæden* Vol. I 66, 43, 44, 55

37 *Bæden* Vol. I 44, 73, 53

Although the spirit of jouissance animates many anarchist texts, nihilism seems to approach it with the most naked embrace; for many nihilists, jouissance is *the* core of anarchism. Without expectations of the world to come, without deference to moral code, and without adherence to a right way to do things, nihilism embraces the act of resistance as a goal in itself. Through this lens, the joy of pissing in a Nazi rocket cannot easily be measured against its risks or results—in jouissance, we find a richness of life unattainable under the status quo. Without using the word explicitly, some imprisoned members of the CCF describe jouissance perfectly: "Neither victory nor defeat is important, but only the beautiful shining of our eyes in combat."[38] This emphasis on the act, without attachment to its outcomes, is one of the aspects of nihilism that has made it such a puzzling force for other anarchists. Critics of nihilism see this sort of emphasis on jouissance and negation as simply a form of indulgent retreat into the realm of personal experience, "because it hurts too much to hope for the improbable, to imagine a future we can't believe in."[39] While this critique has some merit, I think it largely misses the strength of the nihilist position and the beauty of jouissance. Whatever we may chose to do with it, however strategic, ambitious, or optimistic we may feel, our

38 *A Conversation Between Anarchists* 11
39 Zlodey 6

understanding of why we resist can still be solidly rooted in a place of jouissance. I think the nihilist position leaves space for victories, while still recognizing that our capacity to win is quite different from our commitment to liberatory action. Even when we run out of optimistic rhetoric and inspiring stories, our lives can still be oriented against the grain of society. Even from a place of utter hopelessness, we can still find the jouissance in our bodies to attack. Once again, the CCF insist that

> what really counts is the strength we feel every time we don't bow our heads, every time we destroy the false idols of civilization, every time our eyes meet those of our comrades along illegal paths, every time that our hands set fire to the symbols of Power. In those moments we don't ask ourselves: 'Will we win? Will we lose?' In those moments we just fight.[40]

Jouissance is that which animates resistance for its own sake so that even if we have no future, we can still find life today.

40 *A Conversation Between Anarchists* 12



SPONTANEOUS RESISTANCE & TIME

Do you know how one says 'never' in camp slang? 'Morgen früh', tomorrow morning.
–Primo Levi

Nihilism allows for the possibility that there is no future. –Aragorn!

ONE OF THE CONNECTIONS THAT JUMPED OUT AT ME early on in my research was a continuous reference to time in both anarcho-nihilist and holocaust literature. While *Häftlinge* describe horrific experiences of the obliteration of time, nihilists often call for unmitigated attacks against time itself (No Future has become something of a dark motto[1]). This section will set out to explore this connection and to understand what is meant by the anarcho-nihilist ambition to "stop

1 *Attentat* 109

time."[2] The concept of 'futurity,' the sense that one has a future under the existing order, threads these subjects together and provokes a discussion about the radical possibilities of chronological rupture. Those who experienced a complete rupture of futurity in the camps (e.g. realized what the chimneys were for, gave up on allied liberation, etc.) often sunk into a grim and catatonic state, but in some instances they reacted ferociously. Though the most well-known acts of physical resistance against the Nazis were planned and coordinated actions, there were also countless unplanned attacks that plagued the Nazi thirst for order and obedience. Of the stories that have been passed down to us, scant details survive. Some of these stories are patched together from multiple, partial witnesses, while others are merely inferred from the silences they created. These act of spontaneous resistance resonate deeply with anarcho-nihilism, for nowhere else does the rallying cry of No Future apply as well as to those who responded to utterly hopeless situations with acts of fierce abandon. Inmates who physically confronted their oppressors were not engaged in a "rational political struggle for a better future," but rather understood the futility of their situations and chose to fight back regardless.[3] These moments can help us to understand what is at stake in our rethinking of time and what it

2 The Invisible Committee 94
3 *Bæden* Vol. I 45

might mean for us to sever ourselves from oppressive chronological modes.

Spontaneous Resistance in the Lagers

We are entering the time of wordless revolts, the time of illogical revolts, which must in turn be massacred. –*Silence and Beyond*

In Treblinka, on August 26, 1942, when a young Jewish man wasn't permitted to say goodbye to his mother, he wrestled a knife from a Ukrainian guard and stabbed him. The man and everyone else on his transport was shot.[4]

On September 11, 1942, after watching his wife and child be selected for the gas chambers in Treblinka, Meir Berliner attacked an SS man with a knife, stabbing him to death and leaving the knife protruding from his back. Berliner and over a hundred of his fellow inmates were "cruelly killed."[5]

In 1942, as fifteen hundred Polish Jews were being escorted off a train at Auschwitz, a Jewish *Capo* named Morris discreetly informed some of them that they were being led to their death. Unrest spread throughout the crowd and eventually turned into an attack against the SS guards. Forty members

4 Langbein 289
5 Langbein 289

of Morris's *Kommando* joined in the fight. The entire transport and *Kommando* were killed.[6]

On October 17, 1944, Hanna Lévy-Hass, an inmate of Bergen-Belsen whose diary survived the war, recorded that her camp was put on severe lockdown and that rumors had circulated about a women's rebellion in the neighboring camp. The only evidence of this rebellion for Lévy-Hass was the cessation of all regular camp activity and the glow of the crematorium, which operated nonstop throughout the night.[7]

On the night of February 1, 1945, a group of Russian and British POWs, as well as nineteen Luxembourg policemen who refused to join the SS, rebelled as they were being led out of Sachsenhausen to be executed in a surrounding forest. One inmate managed to wrestle a gun away from a guard and fatally shoot him. All of the inmates were subsequently killed by SS machine gun fire.[8]

In late 1942 at Treblinka, a transport of around two thousand Jews refused to enter the gas chamber. Those who yelled out invocations of resistance were beaten, but the call was heard and no one budged. At one point some of them rushed the SS, and, fighting with knives and bottles, injured three guards. Some-

6 Garlinksi 237
7 Lévy-Hass 69
8 Langbein 279

how during this scuffle, a hand grenade exploded that also injured a guard. The entire transport was shot.[9]

Twice in 1943 the train station at Sobibór saw spontaneous rebellions by inmates, who fought with stones, pots, and bottles against armed guards; one of these scuffles saw several guards injured. In both cases, all inmates involved were killed.[10] Also in Sobibór, Richard Rashke informs us that a group of women (many of whom held children) realized that they weren't being taken to a normal shower and became unruly, attacking the guards with bare hands. The SS sprayed them with machine guns. Those they missed were stuffed into the gas chambers."[11]

Filip Müller tells a deeply disturbing story of a small group of Jewish families who, after hiding in dug-outs in southern Poland for four months, were discovered and brought to Birkenau to be killed. As in many other stories, one mother dedicated her final moments to comforting her infant daughter, even as they were led to a wall to be shot by a Nazi named Voss. Müller watched as the two performed a macabre dance: Voss circling trying to figure out where best to shoot the infant, while the mother reflexively turned to keep her daughter away from the barrel of the gun. Eventually Voss grew frustrated and shot the child three times. As he turned his gun on the mother, "she

9 Langbein 289
10 Langbein 295
11 Rashke 62

lost all self-control and flung her daughter straight at her murderer's head."[12] Stunned, Voss wiped the blood off of his face and dropped his gun, clearly unable to carry on. Another guard quickly took over and finished the job.

Marla Zimetbaum, who became a well-known name in Birkenau for her selfless organizing in the camp and for her spectacular escape with a Polish lover, cemented her legendary status when, after being captured and brought back to the camp, she used her last moments under the gallows to defy the Nazis: Before the SS could put the noose around her neck, she cut her own vein with a small razor and, "in the presence of all her fellow inmates, hit an SS man in the face with her bleeding hand."[13] Olga Lengyel, who worked covertly during her time in Birkenau smuggling parcels for a resistance organization, has a different recollection of what is undoubtedly the same incident. She recalls that a woman had escaped with her Polish lover using stolen SS uniforms, but was recaptured and brought back to the camp. When the Nazis tried to parade her around the camp (wearing a placard labeling her as an escapee) as part of her punishment, she resisted and was beaten severely, though was able to land at least one punch on a guards face. In addition to this astonsihing show of defiance, Lengyel recalls that as the woman near-lifeless body

12 Müller 72
13 Langbein 192

was being loaded onto a truck to be taken to the gas chambers, she yelled: "Courage friends! They will pay! Liberation is near!"[14]

On October 23 1943, seventeen hundred Jews transported from Warsaw to Auschwitz were escorted to the gas chambers. When about two-thirds of them had already been taken into the chamber, a rebellion broke out among the remaining several hundred who were in the undressing room. Of what unfolded only foggy, sometimes contradictory details survive: four armed SS officers entered the undressing room, one of them was disarmed by a woman and fatally shot, the other inmates were spurred to action. They cut the electric wires and attacked the other guards, a shootout ensued between the guards at the door and the inmates, and ultimately all of the remaining inmates were led out and shot.[15] In one version of this story, the woman was an actress named Katerina Horowitzová, and she retaliated after SS man Josef Schillinger told her to remove her bra: "she whipped off her garment and startled him by hitting him with it in his eyes. While he was blinded by pain, she grabbed his revolver and shot him and another guard."[16] In another version, her retaliation came after Schillinger told her to dance naked.[17] In another, the woman was

14 Lengyel 112
15 Jan Van Pelt 572; Wasiwicz 47; Garlinksi 237; Langbein 280
16 Laska 180
17 "Prayer for Katerina Horovitz"

named Franceska Mann, and she retaliated when Schillinger snatched the bra off of her body.[18] In yet another telling, the woman was an unnamed dancer who intentionally seduced the SS men while she was undressing, and while they ogled her she smashed one of them in the forehead with her high heel and then disarmed and shot Schillinger and one other guard.[19] The incident "gave rise to legends" and reminded inmates that SS men "were also mortal."[20] Rumors about this rebellion quickly spread throughout the camp and inspired another act of resistance later that same day, of which even less is known. The sole witness to this incident was privy only to the aftermath: the sight of strewn corpses in front of crematorium IV. The fact that the bodies were still clothed implies that a group of inmates hadn't allowed themselves to be taken into the undressing room and were massacred.[21]

Lager-time, Despondency, and Timelessness

One day of insurrection is worth a thousand centuries of normality
–Wolves of Solidarity, Pacific Column

Each of these moments reflects a shattering of illusion, a fierce visceral reaction to oppression, a desperate act

18 Langbein 280
19 Muller 87
20 Langbein 280
21 Langbein 280

in a totally hopeless situation. Liberation in these moments was not necessarily a material gain, but a fleeting lived experience; an existential reorientation from a relationship of domination to one of recalcitrance. Pure jouissance. Some of these attacks resonated widely outside of their perimeter and punctured holes in the Nazi facade of invulnerability, perhaps even inspiring others to fight back. Other attacks simply dissipated in a hail of gunfire. Regardless, each of them seem to defy any notion of hope or strategy, and the very fact that each story ends with a mass slaughter gestures towards a spirit of resistance that prioritized lived revolt over futurity.

In the concentration universe as in the nihilist framework, conceptions of time become extremely important. How we understand time, its movement, and our place within it, shapes how we understand the existing order and the potentials for resistance. While some anarchists have attempted to imagine "how free people have conceived of different shapes of time itself," here we will solely be concerned with how oppressive modes of time are ruptured.[22] For *Häftlinge*, this rupture involved breaking free from three states of chronological awareness: despondency, futurity, and a paralyzing suspension in the present. For anarcho-nihilists, focus has centered largely on breaking free from progressive conceptions of time and false senses of futurity. In both realms, we find an

22 *Bæden* Vol. II 41

insurrectionary potential that exists outside of dominant modes of time. Walter Benjamin's concept of "messianic time" will offer us a vocabulary to describe this transgression.

We begin in the concentration camps, where experiences of time were precarious and fraught with implications. In one sense, inmates were beckoned towards what we will call "*Lager*-time," which is the series of hoops and tribulations through which Nazis created the illusion of futurity, the promise of survival best encapsulated in the Auschwitz slogan "Freedom Through Work." People were told that they were being taken to Sweden, but stepped out of the trains into Auschwitz; they were told they were being taken for delousing, but never left the crematorium; they were told that work would set them free, but they were literally worked to death. This ongoing promise of futurity kept many inmates docile in a system that ultimately produced only two things—German wealth and corpses. While the shattering of *Lager*-time was seemingly the first step to resistance, such a rupture did not necessarily carry insurgent possibilities. For many, the abandonment of futurity simply meant despondency; many souls were broken when the illusion of *Lager*-time was peeled back to reveal an assembly line of death. For countless inmates, the alternative to futurity was the suicidal allure of the electric fence, which offered an immediate escape from the horror of despondency. Others experienced a complete disintegration of the mind and body. Such living-dead

creatures, those whose hearts still beat but for whom death was a foregone conclusion, even had a name within the camps: *Muselmann*.[23] While the Nazis actively fostered a myth of futurity through work and obedience, they simultaneously created the conditions of hopelessness, which for some was akin to death.

For those who did not succumb to despair, the key to survival lay within the tension between *Lager*-time and suicidal despondency. Throughout holocaust memoirs, there is a sense of total immersion in the present, something we will call "suspension." This experience involved the violent eradication of past and future, resulting in an unblinking commitment to survival in the present moment. From the Warsaw ghetto we hear: "Everything taking place outside the Ghetto walls became more and more foggy, distant, strange. Only the present day really mattered."[24] From Auschwitz:

> Why worry oneself trying to read into the future when no action, no word of ours could have the minimum influence?… our wisdom lay in 'not trying to understand,'

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23 *Survival in Auschwitz* 88. "Musselman" is also the German word for Muslim. Though there's no certainty on the origins of this slang, one theory poses that the physical symptoms of a person near death—unable to stand, rocking back and forth, etc.—evokes images of a Muslim praying. Problematic to be sure, and disturbing beyond belief.

24 Edelman 39

> not imagining the future, not tormenting ourselves as to how and when it would all be over; not asking others or ourselves any questions.[25]

Survival meant forgetting about your past life, abandoning thoughts of future liberation, and sinking deeply into the eternal present: "Survival meant thinking of today."[26] In her diary from Bergen-Belsen, Hannah Lévy-Hass reflects on her inability to remember anything about her life before the camps: "The horror that surrounds us is so great that the brain becomes paralyzed and completely incapable of reacting to anything that doesn't stem directly from the nightmare we are presently living through and this is constantly before our eyes."[27] Soma Morgenstern, writing on the psychological impacts of the *Lagers*, concludes that the "key issue was the tyranny of the present—a tyranny that arose from the total uncertainty about the future and led to a destruction of 'the softest tissue of life': memory."[28] This experience of suspension, a total immersion in the present moment, seemed to be the key to enduring the horrors of everyday life. In this state of suspension, however, resistance was still an impossibility.

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25 Levi 116
26 Langbein 53
27 Lévy-Hass 60
28 Jan Van Pelt 557

Imagine yourself walking a tightrope five hundred feet in the air with a powerful strobe light held in front of your face. Are you worried about the future? Try remembering the past. Can you waste seconds thinking about the person who put you in this situation or how you might fight back against them? To survive even a moment in such a situation would require an intense, unblinking focus on the immediate present. This is the spell of suspension. This is how people endured the camps.

That being said, a few managed to break this spell and enter into something much more fierce, as exemplified by the stories above. For those *Häftlinge* who saw their deaths as a foregone conclusion, who had already seen their cities raided, their families gassed, and their culture obliterated, retaliation against the Nazi regime became the only experience left. Rose Meth, one of the women who assisted in the Auschwitz uprising, speaks to this liberatory space when she reflects on her incredibly risky decision to smuggle gunpowder out of a munitions factory: "Of course I agreed right away because it gave me a way to fight back. I felt very good about it, and I didn't care about the danger."[29] Though some might simply read this as bravery, in this context we can perhaps read it as an expression of jouissance, and perhaps even glimpse the experience of someone who inhabited an entirely different chronological mode. Rose was not holding onto

29 Gurewitsch 301

hope for the future or sinking into despair, nor was she suspended in the "tyranny of the present"—from the spectrum of despondency, suspension, and futurity, a rupture forms and reveals a space of insurrectionary possibilities, which Walter Benjamin calls "messianic time."[30] Before expanding on this idea, we will first explore the anarcho-nihilist critique of progressivism and reproductive futurity.

Anarcho-Nihilism, Progressivism, and Futurity

> *The reality is that the future never comes,*
> *but is rather the ideological justification*
> *for the suppression of our desires and*
> *revolutionary change today. Tomorrow*
> *becomes just the romantic notion of*
> *accepting subjugation today.* –Bryan Hill

Anarcho-nihilism is interested in the extent to which severing ourselves from dominant modes of time can open up incendiary possibilities. This involves dispelling the myth of progressivism, the idea that history is a linear story of progress, as well as the myth of reproductive futurity, the idea that what is best for future generations is the continuance of the existing order. Because of the way these ideologies frame our relationship to time, they both prevent meaningful opportunities for negation now.

30 *Bæden* Vol. I 109

The first issue of *Bæden* takes as one of its central concerns a critique of progressivism; that is, the conception of time that frames history as a narrative of progress (i.e. things are getting better over time and we are rapidly moving towards a brighter future). We feel this progress in our bodies as the excitement of technological advancement and architectural achievements; we embrace it as we watch our petitions and protests and riots get bigger and bigger; we fall victim to it every time we express "amazement that the [terrible] things we are experiencing are still possible" in the 21st century.[31] Many anarcho-nihilist thinkers point towards Marxism as the source of progressivism in anarchist thought. The chronology offered by Marxism depicts the present moment as part of a steady historical progression from feudalism to socialism (albeit with a couple terrifying pit stops along the way). Aragorn! writes:

> The conception of history that came out of the Marxist tradition (dialectical materialism) dictated that the transformation of society would pass through capitalism... to transform into socialism and eventually communism. This meant that progressivism was embedded within this (the dominant) branch of socialism.[32]

31 Benjamin 257
32 *Nihilism, Anarchy and the 21st Century* 14

The myth that we are somehow moving forward forms the backbone of the socialist tradition.

Many anarchists have argued that this teleological framework is both ludicrous in its prophetic optimism, and stifling in its programmatic assertions (i.e. that our job is to find ways to advance society into a state of socialism). The progress of society is an illusion created by clever historians and propagandists, and the idea that somehow this historical train is locked into a track that leads to our shared liberation is both intoxicating and toxic. The "progress of society" might be better described as the "evolution of systems of power," and as *Bæden* reminds us: "any progressive development can only mean a more sophisticated system of misery and exploitation."[33] In its refusal of Marxist teleology, *Bæden* takes up the ideas of Walter Benjamin to call for an attack on this kind of progressivism: "Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train... to activate the emergency break."[34] Anarcho-nihilism replaces the program of historical acceleration with one of negation. Rather than moving ourselves quickly along the train tracks of history towards a socialist utopia, we must derail the train and rupture history altogether.

33 *Bæden* Vol. I 12

34 Benjamin, qtd. in *Bæden* Vol. I 108

Like the trains bound for Auschwitz, this movement of history is heading nowhere good and needs to be sabotaged at every possible turn.

Whereas once this progressivism was the domain of bright-eyed revolutionaries, capitalism has seized the tradition, meaning that we are now assaulted with it from all angles—whether through austerity and democratic participation or through patient and restrained "movement building," we are constantly being asked to tolerate intolerable conditions today in order to work towards a brighter future. Using Lee Edelman's queer theory text *No Future* as a framework, *Bæden* sets out to explore how progressivism is used by mainstream society to keep us attached to the existing order. They argue that futurity is ubiquitously packaged with the image of The Child, the ultimate symbol of our commitment to the future—*we must work now, we must compromise now, we must be patient now, in order to secure the well being of the next generation*. The unspoken and dubious premise of this reasoning is that what is best for future generations is the preservation of the existing order. Through this lens, the widely-felt social pressure to have children is actually an obligation to reproduce society and capitalism. The term "reproductive futurity" refers to the way in which the very concept of reproduction becomes imbued with a commitment to the existing order. *Bæden* writes: "The ideology of reproductive futurism ensures the sacrifice of all vital energy for the pure abstraction of the idealized continuation of

society."[35] Because this emphasis on securing a future for The Child prevents us from negating our present conditions, *Bæden* asks us to sever once and for all our attachment to reproductive futurity. The futures that are being dangled in front of our faces are a mirage that will continuously retreat as we move closer, and the cute, sacred image of The Child is often what prevents us from questioning that mirage. Instead, nihilism asks us to cut ourselves from any attachment to reproductive futurity, and instead "fight, hopeless, to tear our lives away from that expanding horizon and to erupt with wild enjoyment now."[36] What nihilism glimpses outside of progressivism and reproductive futurity is perhaps similar to what Rose Meth saw when she chose to resist despite a lack of hope: the insurrectionary mode of messianic time.

Messianic Time

What is to be gained by shattering the progressive conception of time or by abandoning our attachment to futurity? How can we conceive of the chronological mode embodied by those inmates who escaped *Lager*-time, despair, and suspension, and fought back? *Bæden* once again turns to Benjamin and the concept of messianic time, which is an "irrational now-time," an "interruption of linear time," and which exists as "splinters diffused through the empty fabric of

35 *Bæden* Vol. I 24
36 *Bæden* Vol. I 88

capitalist time."[37] As a rupture from oppressive chronological modes, it contains "unlimited possibilities" and "threatens to interrupt the continuum of history."[38] The Invisible Committee[39], also taking inspiration from Benjamin, applies this concept to resistance generally: "Every attempt to block the global system, every movement, every revolt, every uprising should be seen as a vertical attempt to *stop time*."[40] Here we might remember those rebels who spent the first evening of the July revolution of 1830 shooting out clock towers in Paris[41], or the (semi-mythical) anarchist Biofilo Panclasta who, in the final days of his life, is said to have escaped from an old folks' home and climbed to the top of a clock tower where he "arrested the movement of the clock's hands, which so carefully marked the passage of time."[42] When the monotonous rhythms of society's clocks have ceased and the death march of progress has been brought to a halt, messianic time is the space where new forms of life can be birthed. The CCF looks for this historical rupture in the moment of an attack against a system, and in the precious moments afterwards, before the system has turned its switches back on (e.g. after the

37 *Bæden* Vol. I 109
38 *Bæden* Vol. I 109
39 Who often speak the same language as nihilists, but arrive at some different conclusions.
40 The Invisible Committee 94
41 Benjamin 262
42 *Rolling Thunder* 146

riot, before the cleanup); these moments of "unstuck time" are where our desires for the impossible come to the surface, and "in these holes, negations against this world can be born."[43] This project of stopping time is an attempt to break free from the ideologies of progressivism and the spell of reproductive futurity, and to enter into combat with the existing order. Those in the camps who spontaneously fought back knowing that death would be the immediate consequence erupted out of oppressive, paralyzing, and illusory concepts of time, and entered into this space of messianic time.

Here I do not mean to argue that those who fought back in the *Lagers* experienced some mystical chronological transcendence that granted them supernatural bravery. Rather, I am pointing towards the possibilities that exist when we confront our own futurelessness *and* find the will to act: When we don't believe the lies about where we're heading, when we don't sink into absolute despair about how fucked we are, and when we don't just keep our heads down and think about the present moment—when we step out of that debilitating sequence and act against the existing order, no matter the odds. This often means confronting death, imprisonment, alienation, and a variety of other dangers. For the anarcho-nihilists, it also means opening oneself up to new possibilities of being alive. These cries to "stop time" and to

43 *In Cold Blood* 10

discover jouissance are essentially asking us to sever any attachments we have to the existing order, and to position ourselves outside of and against its progress. So long as *Häftlinge* saw a future for themselves in the camps, or remained suspended in the present moment, or gave up on living completely, the Nazis would never have to deal with a moment of defiance. By shattering those chronological modes, some inmates broke with the rhythms of the camp and carved out a different fabric of time. Similarly, so long as we believe that this society is making progress, and so long as we can glimpse a future for ourselves within it or a future for our children, we will remain in some way wed to it. When anarcho-nihilism urges us to abandon those chronological modes, it is in essence asking us to sever all ties to the continuation of society and work instead to negate its existence. In this rupture of time we find a richness of life unimaginable within the existing order. Messianic time is the chronological awareness in which jouissance can flourish, for rather than deferring our rage to the future we can finally realize that now is the time we've been waiting for.



ORGANIZATIONS AND MAJOR UPRISINGS

Overview of Organizations in *Lagers*

Expect nothing from organizations. Defy all the existing milieus, and above all, refuse to become one. –The Invisible Committee

WHILE THE THOUGHT OF A SUSTAINED RESISTANCE organization existing inside of a concentration camp seemed ludicrous to me when I began this project, the fact is that most camps saw the emergence of not one but several formal, long-term organizations. Even in camps where organizing was next to impossible—because of particularly high death and transfer rates, low numbers of political prisoners, or a dominance of "greens" (German prisoners) in prominent positions,—resistance groups still formed and, to various degrees, were able to impact life in the

camps. The mandates of these organizations generally involved some combination of the following: building networks within the camp; communication with the outside world; boosting the morale of inmates; organizing escapes; sabotage; mutual aid; weeding out informants; and getting members into prominent positions. Communist organizations (which were the most common throughout the camps) maintained educational programs, offering lectures on dialectical materialism, political economy, and the history of the worker's movement from memory or with contraband textbooks.[1] In some cases, resistance groups set themselves the ambitious task of preparing for armed resistance against the Nazis by stockpiling arms and organizing into specialized battle groups. This was more common in the later years of the war as the camps became distended and as rumors spread about impending liquidations (i.e. the mass murder of all remaining inmates). At times, the various groups within the camps coexisted with a great deal of friction, unwilling to work with one another due to ideological differences, pre-war hostilities, or outright prejudice; at other times, powerful solidarities across nationality, language, and ideology were forged.

The Buchenwald camp had among the most developed and effective underground networks of any camp, offering a glimpse into the organizational capacities that existed. Within this one camp (which

1 Wasowicz 121

housed a population ranging from 10,000 to 110,000 inmates during the war), there were underground groups of Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Polish Communists, Soviet POWs, Belgians, Italians, Czechs, Hungarians, Yugoslavs, and a Dutch group that had representatives of Social Democrats, liberals, and Catholics.[2] German Communists were the largest group in the camp with over seven hundred members all arranged into cells of three to five people. The French group in Buchenwald was lead by representatives of thirty-four regional and political groups.[3] For many years there was a great deal of infighting between organizations (particularly between Communists and Social Democrats), and so in 1943, many of these groups came together to form the "International Camp Committee". This group met bimonthly to "run an efficient military organization, to perform sabotage acts, and to eliminate controversies and conflicts between different nationalities."[4] As mentioned earlier, some of these organizations even had long-term aspirations: in the spring of 1944, the German Popular Front Committee was formed with the intention of bringing together German Communists, Social Democrats, and Christian Democrats to plan out the future governance of Germany.[5] In that same year, the Polish Commu-

2 Wasowicz 119-120
3 Langbein 172
4 Wasowicz 122
5 Wasowicz 119

nists, (which had 130 adult and 60 youth members in the camp) joined with other Polish organizations to form the "Anti-Fascist Committee" that would primarily concern itself with improving life in the camp.[6] Obviously, each of these organizations risked brutal consequences if their networks, meetings, or conspiracies were discovered.

Within anarcho-nihilist literature, critiques of organizational models appear frequently and lend themselves to an interesting (though complicated) dialogue with stories of concentration camp resistance. Here, I'll offer stories of three of the most significant mass uprisings to happen in the camps (in Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Sobibór), with an eye to the question of organizations. These stories are incredible in themselves, and also offer ample material to explore the reasons that so many anarchists have severed themselves from conventional organizing models. My purpose here is not to launch a scathing critique of concentration camp organizations—such generalizations would be asinine considering the complexities and nuances of the situations in which they operated. Resistance organizations, even those rife with cronyism and strategic flaws, had an enormously important role in the *Lagers*, from the morale boost that helped get people through another day, to the reorganization of camp life that put humane people into jobs formerly occupied by sadistic thugs. That being said, within the history of mass up-

6 Wasowicz 119

risings in concentration camps, formal organizations often had little to offer.

We begin in Poland, where a military officer initiated a resistance movement in some of the harshest conditions imaginable.

The Resistance Movement in Auschwitz & The Sonderkommando Uprising

It was necessary, in fact, to show Poles daily a mountain of Polish corpses before they could be brought to agree together and to realize that, above all their differences and hostile attitudes towards one another in the outside world, there was a more important cause to be served, namely that of a common front against the common enemy.
–Witold Pilecki

The history of organized resistance in Auschwitz begins with the dramatic entry of Witold Pilecki, a Polish military officer who had gone underground with the Home Army (AK) rather than acquiesce to the invading Germans. Pilecki had spent the summer of 1940 petitioning his superiors to send him into the newly-constructed camp in Auschwitz "in order to organize the prisoners, look for means of resistance and mutual assistance, and send reports to Warsaw."[7] Eventually they agreed, and on a brisk September morning Pilecki walked through a crowd of people desperately fleeing

7 Garlinski 19

a German round-up and into the hands of the SS. After two days of being beaten, parched, and taught harsh lessons in collective responsibility, he found himself at the front gates of Auschwitz. Though Pilecki's writing is generally terse and factual, this particular moment of his report stands out with chilling affect: "I bade farewell to everything I had hitherto known on this earth and entered something seemingly no longer of it."[8]

Inside the camp, Pilecki began work establishing the Union of Military Organization (ZOW) by setting up his first "five," a group of five members who would function as an anonymous cell within a broader network. Eventually there would be thousands of members of the ZOW, largely comprised of Poles with some degree of military experience. The other major group to emerge within Auschwitz was the *Kampfgruppe Auschwitz* (the Fighting Group Auschwitz), a steadfastly Communist organization started on May 1, 1943 with the intention of bringing together groups of different nationalities. These two groups would eventually collaborate despite deep tensions over leadership, national allegiances, and political ideology. Smaller resistance groups within the camp included Spanish anti-fascists, German Communists, Polish Social Democrats, Austrians of all political affiliations, a right-wing contingent of the National-Radical Camp,

8 Pilecki 13

French Communists, and at least two Yugoslavian groups in the women's section of the camp.[9]

The various accomplishments of the Fighting Group and the ZOW are too long to enumerate here, but suffice it to say they played a significant role in the daily life of the camp, even for those oblivious to their existence. One pivotal impact of the ZOW was its development and use of the camp hospital as a place of refuge and resistance. Due in part to the efforts of a sympathetic green named Hans Bock,who had been appointed head of the sick bay in the early days of Auschwitz (despite having no medical experience), the hospital was slowly established as a place that was not only occasionally capable of healing people, but was also one of the central pillars of the resistance movement. Underground activities in the hospital included establishing contacts with patients, saving lives by falsely diagnosing illness (to avoid selections or work), executing informants on the grounds of falsified illness, and most spectacularly, breeding lice infected with typhus to be used as biological weapons—these lice were successfully used to kill or disable informants, *Capos*, and even SS officers.[10] The general reluctance of the SS to enter the disease-ridden hospital made it one of the safer places for the organizations to operate.

9 Wasowicz; Garlinski; Langbein
10 Garlinski 57

Furthermore, both the ZOW and the Fighting Group were successful in sustaining contact with the outside world and between sub-camps.[11] Using a variety of ingenious methods, the organizations were able to inform the outside world of what was happening in the camp, to receive updates from the front lines, and to communicate about the possibilities for joint military attacks on the camp. These methods included smuggling mail through corrupt guards or villagers (on the marches between work and the camp), sending messages with escapees (or with one of the few prisoners to be officially granted release[12]), and sometimes simply using the postal service (by bribing camp censors for pre-stamped envelopes).[13] Perhaps the most stunning form of communication utilized by the resistance movement was Alfred Stossel's construction of a radio transmitter, which he operated for seven months from the hospital basement, broadcasting details of transports and mass executions to the surrounding area.[14] Despite intense searches both inside and outside the camp, the SS never located the source of the broadcasts.

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11 Auschwitz, Birkenau and Monowitz were sub-camps of the same broader Auschwitz complex.

12 Those very fortunate few who were ever granted a release from Auschwitz were required to sign a release form stating that they had "no complaints" about the camp and that they were "satisfied" with their stay (Rees 30).

13 Langbein 245; Garlinski 66

14 Garlinski 97-98

Near the end of the war, these channels of communication were used in a way that potentially altered the course of Auschwitz's history: In early 1944, sensing the dwindling morale and confidence of the Germans, the Fighting Group (which was by now the camp's dominant umbrella organization) sent out the names of all SS men running the camp in hopes of having them widely broadcast and so scaring the men out of committing further atrocities. The plan worked, as Langbein writes: "the BBC in London put those persons on notice that they would be held responsible for their atrocities, and the effect of the broadcast was clearly noticeable in the camp."[15] A similar message later that year reached the British government and informed them of an SS plan to liquidate the camp: "This statement was made public, and in the end the SS abandoned its plan to liquidate Auschwitz."[16]

Throughout the entirety of their existence, both the ZOW and the Fighting Group Auschwitz had been patiently planning for a militarily-supported overthrow of the camp. Neither the AK, the British, the French, the Soviets, nor the partisans were ever able and/or willing to lend such support, and the overthrow never took place. In spite of this, Auschwitz did see one major revolt. It emerged not from within the resistance

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15 Langbein 58

16 Langbein 59. Though no concrete links can be drawn between the broadcast and the change of plan, many historians have deduced that it played at least some role in the decision.

movement but from the *Sonderkommando*, a special detail of mostly Jewish inmates who were tasked with running the crematories and gas chambers. Though these workers were given certain privileges (bigger food rations, better bunks, etc.), their labour, which involved facilitating the deaths of thousands of people every week, was among the most murderous and psychologically strenuous. Filip Müller miraculously survived three years in the *Sonderkommando*, which was mostly spent frantically ushering trains of people into gas chambers, stripping the corpses of valuables, and then shoveling them into industrial ovens. When the ovens proved insufficient for the sheer quantities of human flesh moving through the camp, he and his team were made to dig and operate enormous burn-pits with built-in drain pipes that channeled rivers of fat into buckets to be used as fuel for the next train. In due fashion, the SS kept a high turnover rate of these positions in order to prevent information about these assembly lines from getting out, and so no member of the *Sonderkommando* could expect to live very long. Resistance from the *Sonderkommando* was almost unfathomable because of their level of isolation from other prisoners, the privileges they clung to, and their short life expectancy.

Nevertheless, in 1944 some members of the *Sonderkommando* (which now numbered almost one thousand workers) were spurred to action by the onslaught of Hungarian Jews that were pouring into the gas chambers faster than the infrastructure could

handle.[17] This obscene intensification of the killing operation, combined with the suspicion that the extermination of the Hungarian Jews would surely be followed by the liquidation of the *Sonderkommando*, caused some of the workers to approach the Fighting Group and craft a plan for revolt.[18] The response of the organization was one of reluctance—they felt that the "time was not ripe for a general uprising."[19] For the *Sonderkommando*, who expected their imminent slaughter, such strategic tact was out of the question. A document unearthed from Auschwitz in 1962 that had been buried by a member of the *Sonderkommando*, Salmen Lewenthal, chronicles the delays and tensions that existed between them and the Fighting Group:

> From the organization's standpoint they were right, especially because they did not feel *they* were in immediate danger of being

17 "During the summer of 1944, nearly half a million Hungarian Jews were transported to Auschwitz and gassed, shot, or thrown alive into the ovens and burning pits of Birkenau" (Henry 178).
18 Tec 135; Langbein 286. At around the time the revolt was being planned, the SS did in fact begin the process of liquidating the *Sonderkommando* by announcing that two hundred of them would be transferred to a sub-camp. These two hundred were loaded onto a wagon with food for the journey, and then taken directly to a gas chamber nearby. Attempting to hide this slaughter from the rest of the *Sonderkommando*, the SS men took the bodies to the crematoria at night and for the first time in the history of Auschwitz burned the bodies themselves (Langbein 286).
19 Langbein 285

> exterminated... we concluded that if we wanted to accomplish anything in life, we would have to act sooner... but unfortunately they kept putting us off.[20]

By this point the Fighting Group was mostly fixated on the end of the war, hoping that a joint attack on the SS could occur from inside and outside simultaneously. While those Jews who had been working the crematoria saw the end of the war as an inevitable death sentence, the Fighting Group saw it as a moment of possible liberation. Each time that the *Sonderkommando* contacted the Fighting Group they were told to postpone their uprising until the front lines came closer, which they eventually took to mean that "they stood alone."[21] Although the Fighting Group refused to participate in the revolt or to provide guns, they did supply a small amount of explosives that had been painstakingly smuggled out of a factory by female inmates over the course of many months, which became pivotal in the *Sonderkommando's* plan.

Because there are essentially no survivors of this revolt, our understanding of the events are patchy. We know that the action was initiated early, but whether this happened because of a drunk Russian worker, a nosy German *Capo*, or because the SS began the liqui-

20 Qtd. In Langbein 285
21 Jan Van Pelt 588

dation early remains unclear.[22] Whatever the prompt, on October 7, 1944, at about 1:30pm, several hundred of the *Sonderkommando* in Crematorium IV attacked the SS with hammers, axes, and stones, threw several home-made grenades, and blew up the crematorium itself. Realizing that the revolt had begun early, the workers in Crematorium II also launched an attack, shoving a guard into an oven, lighting the building on fire, and then attacking the SS.[23] A hole was cut in the fence leading to the women's camp, where several of the barracks were set to be drenched in gasoline and lit on fire—this never transpired, largely due to the uncoordinated timing.[24] Some inmates were able to cut through the exterior fence and escape, though many of these escapees were later cornered in a barn and killed.[25] Ultimately, Crematorium IV was damaged beyond use, though how much impact this had on the killing operation is debatable since the end of the war was so near. Everyone who revolted that day, including those who briefly escaped the walls of Auschwitz, was killed[26], in addition to more than two hundred people

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22 Gurewitsch 367; Langbein 285, Garlinski 238

23 Rees 257

24 Langbein 288

25 Langbein 288; Garlinski 239

26 Filip Müller was part of the *Sonderkommando* that revolted, but in his memoir he recounts that he spent most of the uprising hiding inside of a chimney, and was able to escape into the general population of inmates later that day.

who were later accused of involvement.[27] The political department spent weeks brutally interrogating all of the women who may have had access to explosive material, beating them until "their bodies looked like pieces of raw liver," but it was unable to find anyone willing to confess or snitch.[28] In the end, the SS settled on four women to hold responsible, and on January 6, 1945, held the last public execution in Auschwitz. Less than two weeks later the camp was evacuated—any inmate able to walk participated in a death march through the snowy fields of Poland, while the infirm and elderly were simply left behind. Whether this decision to evacuate (rather than liquidate) the camp was based on the Fighting Group's dispatch to the BBC, or perhaps to the rebellion of the *Sonderkommando*, remains a matter of speculation.

(One of the often overlooked outcomes of the uprising was that it spared a group of women who had been brought to the camp that morning and happened to be inside of the gas chambers in Crematorium V when the rebellion broke out. After a short while waiting for their "shower", the door flung open and the women were hurriedly taken to a bunker due to the chaos that had broken out. At least one woman from this group, Alice Lok Cahana, went on to survive

27 Rees 257
28 Gurewitsch 303

the camp.[29] Thus, if nothing else, we know that the uprising did in fact save one life.)

In the end, the resistance organizations spent years organizing for a general uprising that never happened.[30] Instead, a group of desperate, informally-organized inmates staged what would be the only coordinated insurrection in the history of Auschwitz. Unsurprisingly, harsh criticisms of the organizations in Auschwitz have surfaced, not solely around their tension with the *Sonderkommando*. Critics have accused the organizations of cronyism, arguing that the members "helped only one another and later boasted that they had engaged in resistance activity."[31] Some have accused the Fighting Group of rampant anti-semitism, and pointed out that this prejudice played a role in their tension with the mostly-Jewish *Sonderkommando*.[32] Similar accusations have been levied against the Polish-dominated ZOW, who allegedly organized to save the lives of Polish resistance fighters by switching their identities with Jewish inmates.[33] Such critiques have seemingly arisen from every camp in which organizations existed. The Communists in Buchenwald, for instance, have been described as a "sworn community" which unquestioningly looked out for its own mem-

29 Rees 253-257
30 Garlinski 254
31 Langbein 54
32 Langbein 407 ff.44
33 Langbein 407 ff.44

bers (regardless of their brutality, anti-semitism, etc.), and whose "cliquishness was the object of criticism by outsiders."[34]

As well as being criticized for their cronyism and anti-semitism, camp organizations have also come under fire for their tendency to advocate restraint to those who sought immediate action, as seen in the case of Auschwitz. Another example comes from Sachsenhausen, where a group of Jewish Communists decided to resist transport to the gas chambers and took a plan for open revolt and a request for arms to Communist leaders of a resistance organization. They were met with deep reservations, for those in the organization felt responsibilities to the entire camp and feared collective responsibility.[35] The Jews fought back regardless, and with bare hands knocked several SS men to the ground before being contained. Yet another situation arose in Auschwitz, in which a group of one hundred young boys, who had been orphans in the camp for many months, were all taken to the hospital and killed by lethal injection, sparking mass outrage. Garlinski writes:

34 Langbein 77. Nevertheless, even Eugen Kogon, one of the most vocal critics of the Communist party in Buchenwald, emphasizes that "the positive achievement of the Communists can hardly be overestimated."

35 Langbein 191

> ...this pile of children's bodies aroused such passions that the news passed like lightning through all the Blocks and *Kommandos* and raised tempers to boiling point. The leaders had great difficulty in restraining their fellow-prisoners and underground soldiers from uncoordinated reactions of rage and despair.

One survivor who experienced this frustrating tension with resistance organizations in Auschwitz cynically concluded: "the Resistance in the camp is not geared for an uprising but for the survival of the members of the Resistance."[36] This tension that existed in the camps between individual desires and collective organizing touches on one of the core nerves of anarcho-nihilist thought.

36 Van Pelt 587

Anarcho-Nihilist Critique of Organizations

Organizations, legislative bodies, and unions: Churches for the powerless. Pawnshops for the stingy and weak. –Renzo Novatore, 1920

By holding a stupid pistol, we have only taken one step in many for escaping from the alienation of "Now is not the moment" and "The times are not ripe." –OLGA Cell FAI/IRF

The anarcho-nihilist critique of organizations stems from a common frustration with the bureaucratic and managerial role of formal organizations in radical spaces. Though this frustration is not new in anarchism[37], it has certainly seen a renewed, and perhaps more fierce articulation in recent years from both insurrectionary and nihilist voices.[38] Many contemporary anarchists have sought to sever themselves

37 Bakunin argued that "political and organizational forms had held the social revolution back" and "that hierarchical and political means could never be used to gain social revolutionary ends," (*Do or Die*). Malatesta argued: "in order to achieve their ends, anarchist organizations must in their constitution and operation, remain in harmony with the principles of anarchism; that is, they must know how to blend the free action of individuals with the necessity and the joy of co-operation which serve to develop the awareness and initiative of their members," (*Do or Die*). Renzo Novatore...well, he just hated organizations.

38 Often the critiques from these two tendencies are nearly indistinguishable, though the results may differ drastically.

completely from the model of formal organizations and to orient themselves towards more wild and joyous forms of coordinated action. One of the primary themes of this critique is the extent to which organizations tend to defer action until the emergence of a mass movement. Because nihilists seek the destruction of everything that comprises society, and because that aspiration will never be shared by a majority (or even a substantial portion) of the population, to wait for mass consensus is tantamount to defeat. The UK chapter of the Informal Anarchist Federation (FAI) writes: "With all the billions of people who live in the world, there will never be a time when a particular act against the State and Capital is felt by all or even the majority of people to be appropriate, good, or desirable."[39] Rather than spend our lives preparing for a mass awakening that likely will not happen, better to attack now and see where it takes us. (It is worth noting here a difference between "deferred" action and "patient" action, for in planning each of the bombings, shootings, and arsons that have defined the nihilist stance, a great deal of patience has indeed been required—let's not mistake urgency for impatience.) A different cell of the FAI writes: "We don't even give a minute of our life in the hope that the multitude will suddenly become aware and wake up! If the oppressed are not ready to raise the hatchet, this is a problem of the oppressed."[40]

39 *325: An Insurgent Zine of Social War and Anarchy* 25
40 *A Conversation Between Anarchists*

Thus, nihilism represents a strong anti-social turn in anarchism, whereby instead of working to mobilize the masses and build a wide-based movement, it prioritizes immediate attack rooted in individual desires. This "aristocratic contempt for the common people," as critics have labeled it, severs nihilists from the task of rousing the "sheeple," and allows for a different set of priorities.[41]

In its most basic expression, the anarcho-nihilist critique of organizations boils down to a tension between the individual and the collective, whereby the nihilist individual refuses to compromise any of their insurrectionary desires for the sake of an imagined collective. To understand this tension, we can think back to 2012 when the CEO of an Italian nuclear power company was shot in the kneecap by two anarcho-nihilists who claimed the attack under the banner of the FAI. After the attack (which was partly inspired by the 2011 nuclear disaster in Fukushima), the pair released a communique pointing to the various atrocities committed in the name of nuclear power and calling for an all-out attack on the nuclear industry.[42] In response to that action, the Anarchist Federation in Italy (a formal Marxist organization with no relationship to the FAI) issued a response that condemned such a renegade action: "... we strongly criticize individualist and vanguardist tactics that do not come out of a broad-based

41 "Hic Nihil, Hic Salta!"

42 "Against The Corporations of Death" 1-2

class-struggle movement. We condemn actions that put workers in danger without their knowledge…"[43] According to this perspective, the individual acting without the validation of a formal collective, and without respect for working class solidarity, has no place in an anarchist movement. In counter-response to this (and other condemnations), insurrectionary and nihilist keyboards ignited with scathing indictments of this breed of "civil anarchism" that tries to restrain individual attacks behind the "working class" banner. Venona Q, in one such essay titled "Scandalous Thoughts: A Few Notes on Civil Anarchism", writes: "The issue for me here is the same denial of individuality that the State imposes—some herding of unique human beings into some utilitarian category by pedagogues and masters who find the individual unwieldy and dangerous, but find an abstract ideological cage immensely comfortable."[44] Venona Q's article diagnoses a long-term, cyclical process whereby every so often a new generation of anarchists need to shed the constrictive skin of the collective in order to reassert the role of the individual, and thus manage the tension of "the patriarchal voice of 'political reason' against the wild rebel spirit."[45] Anarcho-nihilism is, in this light, a fierce and unwavering shedding of that skin.

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43 Anarchist Federation in Italy

44 Venona Q 25

45 Venona Q 25

The way that this same tension played out in Auschwitz is fascinating, and we can cautiously say it seems to bolster the nihilist critique. For all intents and purposes, the statement issued by the Anarchist Federation in Italy could have been written by the Fighting Group Auschwitz, which saw the renegade actions of the *Sonderkommando* as being reckless. Whereas the Fighting Group was working towards the liberation of the whole camp (i.e. mass movement) and condemning anything that might endanger the other inmates (i.e. class solidarity), the *Sonderkommando* represented a smaller affinity group, which although not inherently hostile towards the other inmates, could not wait for them or the outside world to act. By refusing to defer their attacks until a mass mobilization could be organized, by pushing back against a Marxist organizing body, and by acting with a "wild rebel spirit" in a totally hopeless situation, the actions of the *Sonderkommando* resonate deeply with the anarcho-nihilist tendency.

One of the differences between the situation of the FAI and the *Sonderkommando* is the degree of severity to which their actions would implicate others. While the FAI uses incendiary methods knowing that other anarchists will experience such repercussions as arrests, house raids, and grand jury indictments, the *Sonderkommando* acted knowing that it would result in the slaughter of hundreds of people. This remains a real tension in contemporary nihilism and has led some people to a place of paralysis. The authors of

the journal *Attentat* (a word that refers to political assassinations and similar violent acts) conclude that the repercussions of political violence in today's world are perhaps too great to justify: "It is not our central proposition that attentats can, will, or should be the way to confront the state. We are not capable of the horror show that would require."[46] Even without the constrictive role of organizations, nihilism still wrestles with the implications of collective responsibility.

The other two major uprisings to be discussed both happened in extermination camps, where long-term political organizing was an impossibility. These two events will lead us into an exploration of nihilist forms of organizing.

The Sobibór Uprising

At Sobibór I am witnessing the tools of the modern age—trains, assembly lines, and gas engines—used by the Germans to efficiently murder thousands of people on any given day. And yet how new is this really? The primitive whips used by the Germans are no different from those used by brutal slave masters for thousands of years.
–Philip Bialowitz

On the surface, Sobibór resembled a quaint frontier town complete with a pharmacist, tailor's shop, mining cars, and cabins marked with names like "Merry Flea"

46 *Attentat* 146

and "Swallow's Nest." Sunflowers and geraniums were carefully planted everywhere, particularly along the trail that led to the north end of the camp, which was signed as the "Road To Heaven."[47] Underneath this deceptive veneer (one specifically designed to calm prisoners), was a nightmarish reality and a stunningly efficient extermination camp. Unlike the concentration camps—such as Ravensbrück, Dachau, and Buchenwald, which housed long-term prisoner populations—to arrive at the doorsteps of an extermination camp like Sobibór, Treblinka, or Chelmno meant that you were either being put into the gas chambers or being put to work filling them (Auschwitz held the unique position of operating as both a concentration camp and an extermination camp for the later years of the war). At any given time the SS had a crew of one hundred to seven hundred Jewish workers operating every aspect of Sobibór; they were overseen by *Capos* from their midst, who were in turn overseen by hundreds of Ukrainian guards, who were themselves subservient to the German SS. Over the course of its nineteen months of operation, these workers were made to facilitate the deaths of over 250,000 Jews, while also tending to the daily needs of their oppressors.[48] For the SS and Ukrainian guards overseeing this operation, entertainment often took the most twisted forms: prisoners would be force-fed sand until they couldn't walk

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47 Bialowitz 32; Rashke 59
48 Rashke vii

and then paraded around the camp; forced to climb trees that were then chopped down; forced to stand at attention while Barry the dog chewed off pieces of their genitals and buttocks; forced to watch as living babies were held by their legs and smashed around like pieces of meat before being tossed into the mining cars for cremation.[49] Every train that rolled into the station would bring a new transport of thousands of people who would receive a cunningly reassuring welcome speech and then be marched directly into the gas chambers. Those who worked at the train yard unloading and preparing transports for gassing were the last faces that these groups of (mostly unsuspecting) people would see. While lining them up, shaving their heads, and sending them down the "Road to Heaven," they were to inform the newcomers: "This is a work camp. The food is good and the work easy. There's nothing to worry about."[50] Often, that would be the last words uttered before the chamber doors closed and a canister of Zyklon B was dropped in from the ceiling.

By 1943, the desire for co-ordinated vengeance and escape had been fomenting among workers at Sobibór for some time, and many connections were formed based on mutual desires for revolt. While renegade escapes had been attempted, few succeeded, and the toll of collective punishment was vast. No

49 Rashke 61, 62, 146, 98
50 Rashke 59

one had conceived of a plan that could overthrow the camp or allow for mass escape, until September when a transport arrived and brought into the camp several Russian-Jewish workers who had both military and partisan experience. The small network of camp conspirators quickly developed contacts with one of the Russians, Aleksander "Sasha" Pecherskii, whose recalcitrant attitude and strategic mind earned him a great deal of respect and leadership among the rebels.[51] Sasha agreed to offer leadership to the rebels, and after several highly secretive meetings between fewer than a dozen conspirators, a plan was set in motion to liberate all six hundred prisoners. After at least one delay due to unpredictable conditions, the revolt was initiated on October 14, 1943. The first phase of the plan, which was relatively successful, was to lure key German officers into private settings and discreetly kill them. Upon entering the room where the "shoe fitting" or "valuable leather jacket" was promised, the guard would be attacked with hand-made axes and

51 Rashke 162; Langbein 296. Sasha's first week at the camp gave rise to legends. During this week he led his fellow POWs in a sing-along of a popular Russian resistance song, poured his ration of soup onto the ground to display his horror at watching the callous beating of the cook during its preparation, miraculously chopped through a tree in less than two minutes as part of a life-or-death challenge from a Ukrainian guard, and then refused the pack of cigarettes the guard offered him as a prize. Any one of these defiant acts was of course grounds for execution in the camp (Rashke 162-4).

knives while others worked nearby to cover the sound of screams. Eleven of Sobibór's top functionaries were killed in this way between 3:30 and 5:00 pm, and their weapons taken into rebel hands.[52] During that time, an inmate with knowledge of electrical systems was able to disconnect the lights and telephones to the whole camp.[53] The second part of the plan required all inmates to assemble for the afternoon roll call, gather into marching formation, and simply walk out of the front gate with a sympathetic *Capo* at their helm. The idea was that without the commanders around to give orders, a moment of confusion would allow the inmates to get far enough past the gate so as to scramble into the nearby forests and avoid the minefields all around the camp. The roll call was initiated early, piquing the suspicions of some guards. The plan quickly fell apart, and what ensued was a murderous chaos.

Ukrainian guards fired from towers with heavy machine guns, while the pistols that rebels had appropriated earlier in the day meekly fired back. Some inmates set fires around the buildings hoping to burn the camp to the ground, while others rushed towards the camp armory to find more weapons.[54] Within

52 Bialowitz 113-115; Langbein 298

53 Rashke 298

54 At least one account states that the inmates were able to clear out the armory (Langbein 70), while other seems to indicate that the armory was never reached (Bialowitz).

minutes, the inmates were massively overpowered and frantic escape became the only thinkable option. Inmates rushed to climb, cut, or collapse the barbed wire fence (many died tangled there) and flee across the heavily-mined field towards the forest. Those who survived this mad dash did so only because a path had been cleared of mines by those who ran before them. Upon reaching the forest, the rebels faced a host of other challenges including starvation and being ratted out by local farmers. Jewish partisan groups represented an ideal opportunity to continue the battle against the Nazis, while those who stumbled into the midst of Polish partisan groups report being robbed and shot at.[55]

Of the roughly 650 inmates in the camp on the day of the revolt, about 365 tried to escape; those who remained in the camp were killed in the days after. Of those who attempted to escape, 185 were killed by gunfire or landmines. Within ten days, an additional 107 had been recaptured and killed. Of the remaining one hundred at large, another twenty three were killed by non-Germans before the war ended, and several others died of illness.[56] Between forty and sixty participants in the uprising survived the war, which along with four others who had escaped earlier, are the only known survivors of Sobibór.[57] On the whole, this

55 Bialowitz 140
56 Bialowitz 194
57 Bialowitz 194; Langbein 300

is considered the "greatest success of inmates in open resistance," both in terms of the number of guards killed and the number of successful escapees.[58] It also brought an end to the mass extermination at Sobibór, as days later the ss demolished the buildings, cleaned the site, and planted over the whole area with pine trees.

The Treblinka Uprising

The fiery glow that poured forth over Treblinka that night had a different color, a different origin, and a different interpretation than the one of all previous nights. –Richard Glazar

A similar insurrection was launched by the workers of Treblinka, another extermination camp located only several hours north of Sobibór on the Eastern edge of Poland. A gruesome glimpse of life inside this camp is offered by the memoir of Chil Raichman, who spent nearly a year as a worker in Treblinka before participating in the revolt. His book reads like a strobe-lit horror show: a series of surreal, nightmarish images separated only by the frenzied whips and shouts of ss and Ukrainian guards (whom he simply refers to as "murderers"). His first job in the camp is as a barber, chopping the hair off of naked women before they are packed like sardines into the gas chamber; throughout his frenzied workdays he is unable to respond to their

58 Langbein 70

desperate questions as he is constantly under the supervision of a whip that cracks his spine if he speaks or takes more than five snips to finish a job.[59] After weeks in this role he is transferred to the other side of the camp, where he is put to work wrenching bloated bodies out of the chambers, loading them two at a time onto thin pallets, and dragging them to open pit graves. He is then assigned work as a dentist, prying open the mouth of each corpse to extract any valuable metals, filling suitcase after suitcase with human teeth. In between these jobs he sorts victims' clothes, hauls sand into the pits, and in the final months of the camp is put to work unearthing and burning all of the corpses they had been working so hard to bury.[60]

To report illness in Treblinka is to be tortured and shot, to display an open wound is a death sentence, and to go to the bathroom requires being merci-

59 Raichman reports witnessing the defiant last stand of one teenager in the hair-cutting chamber, who upon seeing all of the naked women crying, implored them to *stop going to their deaths as cowards*, and to instead *laugh in the faces of their murderers.* "All stand as if frozen to the spot. The murderers look around. They become even wilder and the girl laughs in their faces until she leaves," (Raichman 34).

60 Much to the Nazis' dismay, the blood had seeped its way up past the layers of ash and sand, and so better methods of hiding their deeds needed to be found. After the camp guards failed to devise a way to adequately burn thousands of corpses per day, the SS called in a specialist nicknamed "The Artist" who taught them the proper methodology and supervised the construction of enormous ovens (Raichman 85-86).

fully granted a number by a guard and then reporting to the "Toilet Supervisor" who is dressed like a clown and made to whip anyone who sits longer than two minutes.[61] Needless to say, the opportunities for resistance in this horrific situation are nil.

Though in the first year of Treblinka's operation a worker couldn't expect to live more than one or two weeks, eventually the Nazis' need for productivity trumped their callous disregard for life and workers were preserved for longer periods—this presented new opportunities to resist.[62] Whispers about an uprising spread, and eventually a conspiracy involving upwards of sixty members (organized into several cells) developed.[63] Those responsible for recovering valuables from the victims slowly started to stockpile money, while others worked on acquiring arms through theft or bribery of corrupt Ukrainian guards.[64] The search for weapons seemed futile, until a fourteen year old named Edek put a sliver of metal into the lock of the

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61 Raichman 112,56,121. To add to the insanity of Treblinka, the camp even housed a zoo where wild bears and foxes from the surrounding forests were caged for the entertainment of the guards.

62 Langbein 290

63 Langbein 291

64 Julian Chorazycki, one of the original organizers of the revolt, had managed to secure purchase of weapons from a corrupt Ukrainian guard, but when an SS officer spotted the stack of money in his pocket Chorazycki used a cover story to protect his conspirators and attacked the officer with a hospital dissecting knife. (Langbein 290)

camp armory; when the lock was taken to be fixed, the Jewish locksmith was able to make an impression and a copy of the key.[65] This access to arms, alongside the morale boost offered by meeting some of the survivors of the Warsaw ghetto uprising (who were being shipped to Treblinka), turned revolt into a real possibility. Several dates were considered for an attack, but unpredictable conditions continuously led to postponements, and the more senior organizers had a "hard time persuading young fellow conspirators to be patient."[66] As transports started to slow, and rumors of impending liquidation spread, a date was finally picked. One of the organizers summarized the plan as such: "First catch and finish off the chief slavedrivers; disarm the guards, cut the telephone connections; burn and destroy all the equipment of the death factories so they cannot be made operational anymore; liberate the penal camp for Poles two kilometers away, join forces with them and make our way into the forests to form a strong partisan group there."[67]

On the morning of August 2, 1943, the workers in Treblinka prepared themselves: those who worked in the SS huts were rummaging through belongings looking for weapons and smuggling them back to the garage under cover of a garbage collection. Jacek, another fourteen year old rebel, used the prized key

65 Langbein 291

66 Langbein 291

67 Langbein 292

to slip into the armory where he quietly cut a hole in the rear window and began passing weapons out to be added to the garbage collection. On the other side of the camp, a worker tasked with cleaning buildings secretly replaced his disinfectant with gasoline. Similar to each of the other camp uprisings, the plan in Treblinka was initiated prematurely, meaning that not everyone had received weapons, nor had the telephone lines been cut. After a signal shot was fired, grenades and bullets began hailing down onto the unsuspecting guards, while Molotov cocktails engulfed the barracks in flames and prisoners rushed the fence. Estimates of the number of escapees range from 150 to 600, while the death toll of SS and Ukrainian guards ranges from zero to 200.[68] As in Sobibór, successful escape meant the beginning of a new, even more dangerous mission: to survive the hostile countryside. In the end, 52 of the rebels lived to see the end of the war and tell the world about Treblinka.

Anarcho-Nihilism and Informal Organizing

An informal anarchist organization flows like water and takes new forms according to the action it wants to carry out. –Conspiracy of Cells of Fire, Imprisoned Members Cell

Because of the unique conditions of the extermination camps, long-term, formal organizations were an im-

68 Langbein 294

possibility. What arose instead were informal conspiracies of inmates that had one shared ambition: insurrection. What they accomplished was nothing short of miraculous: the two most successful uprisings to occur in Nazi camps and the liberation of some of the only eye witnesses to the horrors of extermination camps. They did this without political allegiances, without bureaucracy, and without deferring to history's fabled "ripe conditions."[69] Although the conspiracies that formed in Sobibór and Treblinka don't necessarily reflect any sort of 'ideal nihilist model', they do resonate with the approach that anarcho-nihilists have taken toward organizing outside of conventional structures. Such organizations as the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire (CCF), the Informal Anarchist Federation (FAI), Wild Reaction (RS), and Individualists Tending Toward the Wild (ITS)[70] have played a significant role in the emergence of anarcho-nihilism as a widespread tendency, particularly in Europe, South America, and Mexico.[71] Although this text will not be offering any sweeping histories or critiques of these groups, I will attempt to use their words to briefly explore how it is that anarcho-nihilists have set about to organize themselves.

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69 Once again, a great deal of patience was required to strike at the right moment. The difference between deferral and patience rests on one's proven commitment to action.

70 ITS do not explicitly identify as nihilists, but certainly have a nihilistic bent.

71 *Actualizing Collapse*

The CCF emerged in 2008 from a minority incendiary tendency in Greece: anarchists who were interested in autonomously attacking symbols of power but were dissatisfied with the lack of strategy, coherence, development, and perspectives that this level of improvisation and disorganization offered.[72] Without some degree of cohesion, they found, the incendiary tendency "risks fading into the randomness of events and limiting itself to occasional upsurges that lack planning and perspective."[73] This perennial observation has led many group-weary radicals to rethink the concept of organizing. In one of their later communiques, the CCF reflects on this process in their own formation:

> As anarchists, we often distance ourselves from the concept of organization because we equate it with hierarchy, roles, specialization, 'you must,' and obligations. However, words acquire the meanings given by the people who use them. As the Conspir-

72 *A Conversation Between Anarchists* 4

73 *A Conversation Between Anarchists* 5. A similar observation is made by the Invisible Committee, who write: "Organizing is acting in accordance with a common perception… without this binding agent, gestures dissolve without a trace into nothingness, lives have the texture of dreams, and uprisings end up in schoolbooks," (*To Our Friends* 17).

> acy of Cells of Fire, we stormed into battle over the meaning of revolutionary anarchist organization.[74]

To combat a lack of momentum and visibility in their tactics, they took a new approach to organization and began launching attacks under the banner of the CCF, a network of informally organized cells that could conspire together *and* act with complete autonomy. From the beginning, the CCF placed a high priority on communiques as a way to collectively develop ideas and maintain momentum. Their initial wave of attacks on January 21, 2008 involved twelve bombings and arsons targeted against banks, car dealerships, and a state-run power company. A month later, fifteen more attacks followed (including an arson attack on the Associate Justice Minister's office), which consolidated their presence as a "stable and coherent collective that promotes the destruction of power and society."[75] In 2011, the CCF effectively merged with the FAI, an "informal anarchist structure based on revolutionary solidarity and direct action," that had been working under a similar model since the early 2000s.[76] By that point, the FAI had hundreds of actions affiliated with its

74 *Sun Still Rises* 1
75 *Sun Still Rises* 10
76 *325: An Insurgent Zine of Social War and Anarchy* 23

name, including the bombings of several European Union buildings, a police headquarters in Genoa, and a courthouse in Rome. Once again, communiques from each of these actions have served as a central medium for the exchange and development of ideas within the nihilist tendency.

The ITS, which emerged in Mexico in 2011 with a bombing targeted at a university's nanotechnology department, approached organizing in a similar fashion: without "leaders nor commands," ensuring that "the cells enjoy total autonomy in the attack."[77] So vitriolic were the ITS against leftist organizations that in 2011 they sent an incendiary package (i.e. letter-bomb) to a Mexican Greenpeace office, declaring war against those who "only seek to reform the system and create alternatives"; who wage "hypocritical campaigns in 'favor' of the environment in order to gain public notoriety"; and who posture as being oppositional even though "everything that they defend is invested in the system."[78] In contrast to the leftist approach, ITS insisted that "the best option to slip away from the system continues to be informal organization, meeting as individu-

77 *The Collected Communiques of Individualists Tending Toward the Wild* 25

78 Ibid 71. In light of much criticism, ITS later reconsidered this war on leftist organizations and opted instead for a policy of simply ignoring them, while focusing attacks exclusively on the "Techno-industrial System."

als in affinity or alone, betting on insurrectionalist immediatism and the quality of sabotage, [and] rejecting formal organization."[79] The ITS merged with a new organization in 2014 called RS, which maintained this informal approach: "RS does NOT have leaders or a fixed and absolute leader, we are NOT an army or Marxist guerrilla group, RS is composed of groups of individuals responsible for our own actions, who act according to their possibilities."[80] Without bureaucracy, without imposed uniformity, and without appeals to public legibility, these informal organizations have inspired incendiary attacks and networks of solidarity around the world.

One of the aspects of anarcho-nihilism that makes this kind of informal organizing possible is the tactical freedom afforded by its rejection of all inherited programs, moralities, and expectations. It urges us to take ethical decisions into our own hands rather than appealing to any socially governed notions of right and wrong, thus opening up an infinite spectrum of tactical thinking that can more meaningfully interact with the particularities of our unique context.[81] Experimentation, then, takes the

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79 Ibid 25

80 *Actualizing Collapse* 21. I have just learned that RS has declared itself *morte* as of August 2015, and has divided into several smaller informal organizations, some anonymous, others of which will make their names known soon.

81 *Anarchy and Nihilism: Consequences*

place of formulaic thinking in revolutionary struggle: "Rather than organization, then, in the present we might simply speak of experimentation, as the willingness of small groups of people to gamble on these admittedly slim possibilities with absolutely no guarantee of success."[82] What we hope to find when we open up our field of vision like this is that anarchistic organizing doesn't have to be a soul-sucking, bureaucratic affair; on the contrary, we might find that "we *can* organize ourselves, and that this capacity is fundamentally joyful."[83] An informal organization like the CCF or RS allows space for individuals and affinity groups to act with unrestrained ferocity against systems of domination, while still being connected to a network of people who are interested in similar ideas and who can act in solidarity with each others' struggles.

The groups that emerged in Treblinka and Sobibór were able to act with the sort of fluidity and tactical freedom that the *Sonderkommando* nearly surrendered in the presence of a formal, communist organization. Like the members of the FAI or the ITS, their unity as a group came solely from their joint willingness to attack the existing order. Though there is a great deal of nuance and complexity that should not be overlooked, the fact remains that the two most successful uprisings to occur in Nazi con-

82 "Hic Nihil Hic Salta!"
83 The Invisible Committee 219

centration camps happened in two of the only camps without formal organizations. This in itself should challenge anarchists and other radicals to deeply question the pragmatic function of organizations in our lives. While formal and sustained organizational methods can be useful for certain goals, we should remember that they are often structurally incapable of working towards moments of complete rupture. What they offer in terms of resources, visibility, and longevity, must be measured against the hurdles they often create between people and their insurrectionary desires. That being said, while the informal organizational methods being experimented with by nihilists are exciting and have clearly facilitated a great deal of incendiary action, they also carry with them inevitable shortcomings and pitfalls, not least of which is the sort of solipsism that results in a Greenpeace office getting bombed. And though informal organizational models may be able to mitigate the problem of collective responsibility, they will never be able to fully solve the problem. Just as the authors of *Attentat* become paralyzed by the "horror show" that would be required to violently confront the state, so too did the Fighting Group Auschwitz and other concentration camp organizations attempt to navigate the tension between attacking a dominant order and the responses this would provoke. Ultimately somebody along the line is going to have to make shady ethical choices, regardless of organizational model. Thus, while I

think that stories of concentration camp uprisings can help us to develop a healthy wariness around the role of organizations, we must also stay vigilant to nuance. There are no easy answers to these questions. Without dismissing (or attacking) every formal organization we encounter, we can continue to experiment with non-hierarchical organizational forms that might facilitate, rather than defer, moments of liberatory rupture.



REFLECTIONS

Cruel Optimisms

The Machine has fabricated a landscape in which even at the depths of suffering it is less unpleasant to choose among the officially proffered options than to resist, to transgress, to fight back, to step out of line. The lessons of the Holocaust were well learned. We will walk through the very last door as long as it is the easiest of a well managed set of choices. –Lev Zlodey & Jason Radegas

The ghetto was ruled by neither German nor Jew; it was ruled by delusion –Elie Wiesel

IN HER BOOK *CRUEL OPTIMISM*, LAUREN BERLANT dissects some of the reasons that human beings cling so tenaciously to hopeful ideas. She defines "cruel optimism" as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is

discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic."[1] What makes these attachments cruel is not just the harmful impact of the object of desire, but the sense in which the object comes to provide something of "the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world."[2] Without the object of our desire, we fall apart. Underneath of a cruel optimism is an existential abyss, and yet severing ourselves from it poses the only real possibility for growth. As Berlant writes: "Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of the enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?"[3] In the Nazi camps, these cruel optimisms had a name: *paroles*, which referred to optimistic rumours that spread through the camps, usually about the war nearing an end or the partisans nearing the camp walls.[4] The false sense of hope that such rumours offered was both a lifeline for desperate people, and a perpetual deterrent for resistance. What cruel optimisms might we be clinging to in our current situations?

Anarchism is fundamentally posed to challenge many cruel optimisms held by society, and anarchism

1 Berlant 24
2 Ibid
3 Ibid 2
4 Garlinski 70

is in turn having its own cruel optimisms challenged by nihilism. Nihilism is the incredulous voice whispering impossible questions: Are we toxically attached to the idea that we can build a new world in the shell of the old, despite overwhelming evidence that points towards the impossibility of that happening? Are we stuck in a model of time that binds us to the reproduction of society and endlessly defers incendiary action? Have we inherited a set of stagnant revolutionary models that serve only to limit the full spectrum of tactics available to us and to manage the rebellious desires that course through our bodies? Is all of our resistance predicated on the fantasy that we can actually bring an end to global capitalism?

For those in the *Lagers*, the dissolution of cruel optimisms was the most crucial step towards resistance. Immersed in a fog of misinformation, insidious lies, and unbearable truths, very few inmates managed to come to terms with the severity of their situations, and even fewer were able to muster the will (or had the luck/privilege/physical ability, etc) to act on those truths. Nihilism is the voice at the Warsaw Ghetto train station whispering, *these trains are bound for an extermination center*; it is the voice on the "Road to Freedom" whispering, *these aren't showers*; it is the voice in the *Lagers* definitively proclaiming, "no one is going to save us".[5] Some of the truths that nihilism

5 As Sasha did for the inmates of Sobibór when they asked about the possibility of being rescued by partisans (Rashke 171)

asks us to confront are almost as severe and unbelievable as the truth about the camps. Groups like the CCF and the FAI ask us to accept the possibility that the majority of human beings on this planet will never be motivated to resist oppression. The zine *Desert*[6] asks us to accept that global climate change is unstoppable, and that, despite our best efforts, it will not result in the end of capitalism, patriarchy, or civilization as a whole. The authors of *Attentat* confront the grotesque possibility that meaningful social change is actually impossible in the current landscape, and that action is not even necessarily justified:

> Anything less complex than the spectacular, cybernetic, late capitalism of this world is hopelessly naive and simplistic. It would necessitate untold violence and brutality. It would tear asunder the illusions of two hundred years of humanistic, rights-based social organization... Practically, we don't live in an era where utopian or even liberal (in the broadest sense of the word) political change is possible.[7]

These are all grotesque ideas in that they force us to confront a situation without hope. The problem

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6 Once again, not explicitly nihilist, but certainly written with a nihilistic critique.

7 *Attentat* 149, 152

for many of us is that these ideas happen to resonate on a very deep level. We just don't always know what to do with them.

Though we are certainly not obliged to accept every nihilist position that comes out of the woodwork (many of which are overly simplistic and loaded with brawny machismo), some of them are just impossible to ignore. Others, such as the idea that we should turn our backs on the positivist projects that sustain us and give us joy, can be wrestled with and taken for what they're worth—perhaps a willingness to be honest about the limits of such projects. In other words, this isn't about *becoming* a nihilist. Nihilism does not demand our allegiance, because it is not a political ideology. I am more inclined to look at it as a tendency in the true sense of the word, and to embrace it as a fluid presence in our lives that constantly asks us to negate our own ideologies, certainties, and optimistic attachments. I find any form of nihilism that gets used as an excuse not to dream, not to act, and not to engage earnestly with other people to be dull—I am interested in a nihilism that ravenously digs below the surface of commonly accepted ideas, and that can help us to ground our resistance in something more meaningful than tired slogans and listless strategies. I am interested in a nihilism that helps us to reorient our lives away from cruel optimisms and towards jouissance.

Insurrectionary Memories

> *To remember the struggle in the present is to glimpse which road we have walked upon, to help understand where to place our next steps—this is to use insurrectionary memory to replant ourselves tactically and strategically in combat against the oppressive reality.* –Anonymous Chilean Anarchists

Reading holocaust literature is not easy work and I don't blame people for turning away from it. Nearly every page of memoir brings with it a new layer of hellish imagery, trauma, and misanthropic insight. I felt called to these stories for a number of personal reasons, and was motivated to keep reading when I started to glimpse the ways that they might be interesting to other anarchists. My experience of these stories became even richer when I started to realize that one of the most widespread and crushing fears for those who entered the camps was of not having their stories heard, of being forgotten by history. Primo Levi observed that the most commonly reported nightmare in the *Lagers* was not one of death or torture, but the alienation of clogged mouths and muted words. "Why," he asked, "is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?"[8] With this in mind, reading diaries and memoirs becomes less of a dry

8 Levi 60

historical excavation, and more of an interaction with those who staked their last shreds of energy on the hopes that they would not be forgotten. Because the Nazis worked so vigilantly to erase the *Ballastexistenzen* from history, to forget them would be "akin to killing them a second time."[9]

In remembering these voices, we also have the opportunity to carry on past struggles and to turn the stories of those who came before us into fodder against our oppressors. As we all know, history is written by the victors, and so the narratives of Progress and Great Men offered to us by society generally serve only to reinforce power. Benjamin warned that "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" and that "this enemy has not ceased to be victorious".[10] The fact that the Nazi holocaust has been consistently wielded to justify the murder and oppression of the Palestinian people epitomizes how the dead can be re-animated to perpetuate cycles of domination. Similarly, looking at all the ways that historical revisionism has been used (occasionally by anarchists) to minimize the holocaust and perpetuate anti-semitism in the form of conspiracy theories reminds us that we simply don't have the option of letting history rest in its grave. By engaging ourselves in this project called "history", we can find ways to turn past struggles against current forms of domination and to "ensure that the memo-

9 Wiesel xv
10 Benjamin 255

ry of the dead continues to haunt the living."[11] I see this happening all around me with People's History posters and Silvia Federici reading groups, with land acknowledgments and Haymarket handbills. History does not need to be neutral, but rather can fly in the face of domination and help to sharpen and expand our conflicts against the powerful.[12] As our Chilean friends have declared: "Insurrectionary memory is our weapon!"[13] It is my hope that this text can contribute to this ever-expanding arsenal.

It is worth noting here that not all history speaks loudly enough for us to easily hear it. How many stories of concentration camp resistance have been lost? Because of the sheer brutality of the Nazi regime and the conditions of isolation in which much of this history unfolded, it is safe to assume that most acts of resistance were captured only in the fleeting wisps of gun smoke that silenced fast-beating, recalcitrant hearts. In so many ways, our willingness to attend to the silences of history may determine our ability to understand this world and how we got to where we are.

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11 *You Can't Shoot Us All*
12 *Bæden* Vol. I 104
13 *Bæden* Vol. I 105

The Void

The active nihilist sees in the unknown future and despair at our current situation, a call to arms. Meaning is found in approaching the void rather than in the false knowledge of what is on the other side of it. –Attentat

We are nihilists regardless of whether we call ourselves by the name, because we have no road out of this. We have only the starlit wilderness... The first act of navigation is to set foot in the wilderness. Only then can we put our hands against the bare earth, feeling for the dim warmth of those fires still smoldering beneath. – "Hic Nihil, Hic Salta! (A Critique of Bartlebyism)"

With every rebellious footstep we take, we are entering an unknowable void. There are no reliable maps of the terrain that our struggles will occupy. No one has a leg up on the question of liberation. So much has been tried and so much has failed, let us finally admit that we don't know what is "right" or what will "work".[14] Nobody knows how, why, or if a dominant order will fall. We don't know if there are enough letterbombs in the world to bring an end to nuclear power, nor do we know if a well-timed mass uprising in Auschwitz would have actually succeeded in shutting down the camp. Despite what anyone tells us, there is no guar-

14 Venona Q 28

antee that the workers of the world are going to rise up, nor any assurances that such a thing would even lead to a desirable situation.

Though we have inherited a great many ideas about how to confront domination, we know that nothing is set in stone. From the shattered tools and bones of our predecessors, we craft our own weapons. Nothing is guaranteed to work, yet we attack regardless. We do so naked, having shed the rags of morality, ideology, and politics that had accumulated over time. We confront this world raw, in all its horrifying glory. We negate every truth and rule and we proceed with a spirit of incendiary experimentation. We dream big, expect little, and celebrate every moment of rupture. We take every opportunity to ensure that those in power lose sleep and that their functionaries have miserable jobs. We set our lives to ripping up the geraniums that line the extermination camp paths, pissing in the gears of society's machinery, and when all else fails, we will follow in the footsteps of those who spent their final minutes in the gas chambers singing and fucking.[15]

May jouissance be the blessed flame that guides us into the void.

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15 Müller 151

GLOSSARY

AK: The Polish Home Army, a resistance army fighting Nazi occupation.

Ballastexistenzen: Hitler's preferred term for the "undesirable and unnecessary" members of society.

Capo: A prisoner appointed by the Nazis to be the head of a labour crew.

CCF: Conspiracy of Cells of Fire, an informal organization started in 2008 in Greece.

FAI: Informal Anarchist Federation, an informal anarchist organization birthed in 2003 in Italy.

Futurity: the impression that one has a future within the existing order.

Greens: German prisoners in the concentration camps, often given functionary positions with the camp (e.g. Capo, Senior Camp Inmate, etc.), named for the green badges they were made to wear.

Häftling: A prisoner in the Nazi concentration camp; plural - Häftlinge.

ITS: Individualists Tending Toward The Wild, an informal organization started in Mexico in 2011.

Kommando: A labour crew.

Lager: A Nazi concentration camp (German word meaning "camp" or "storehouse").

RS: Reaccion Salvaje/Wild Reaction, an informal organization started in 2014 in Mexico.

Recalcitrance: resisting authority or control; not obedient; hard to manage.

Reds: Political prisoners in the concentration camps, named for the red badges they were made to wear.

Reproductive Futurity: The belief that the existing order is the safest future for children in the abstract, and that sacrifices are to be made in the name of this abstract Child.

SS: Schutzstaffel, a paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler that was responsible for running the concentration camps.

Sonderkommando: A work detail of (mostly Jewish) camp inmates tasked with operating the gas chambers, crematorium, and other processes of extermination in the camps.

ZOW: The Zwiazek Organizacji Wojskowej, a Polish underground resistance organization in Auschwitz, started by Witold Pilecki.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

IN WRITING AN OVERVIEW OF BOTH anarcho-nihilist thought and concentration camp resistance, I have omitted much. The nihilist themes of negation, time, and organization could have happily been joined by conversations about identity abolishment, queerness, domestication, and more. Stories of *Häftlinge* who lashed back against the camp systems could have been elaborated by countless stories of escape, mutual aid, and nonviolent civil disobedience, all of which played a part in the broader story of resistance in the Lagers. There are many questions and topics that still remain unexplored for me.

The experience of gender and genderlessness in the camps is a particularly amazing topic that I'd like to think more about, and that might contrast well with anarchist rhetoric about gender abolition. Primo Levi remembers how disturbing it was to work next to female prisoners who had lost all outwards demarcations of femininity, and also how demoralizing and shameful it was for him to be put to work in a German laboratory where he, in his genderless state, was forced to work alongside outwardly presenting German women.[1] What insights about gender and the desire to abolish it can we take from his and other experiences of the violent eradication of gender within the camps?

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1 Levi 142

The topic of Nazis and ecological destruction is also one that I feel intrigued by. The Nazis, and particularly Himmler, had an obsession with rendering wild spaces into agricultural utopias, which meant that many camp inmates were put to work doing broad-scale landscape architecture. Auschwitz itself was right at the junction of two major rivers, a well-known flood plain that required an enormous amount of destructive landscaping to make hospitable for the camp. Filip Müller notes that much of this water became grossly contaminated by a "black, evil-smelling ooze" that seeped up from mass burial sites during hot summer months. The Nazis' relationship to nature is particularly interesting considering news from the Hambach Forest where a small group of land defenders are working to protect some of Germany's last old-growth forests against the largest, most sinister earth-eating machines in the world. I've been recently informed that whole villages around the mining site are being evicted under Nazi-era laws.

Lastly, I am very curious to know of the experiences of anarchists in the camps—I know they were there, I just haven't been able to find any. If anyone knows of any memoirs or books that reference specific anarchist *Häftlinge*, I would greatly appreciate the heads up.

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Blessed is the flame that rises from our hearts and burns everything around us.


POLAND
WARSAW
CHELMNO
LODZ
WROCLAW
GROSS-ROSEN
KRAKOW
AUSCHWITZ
BURKENAU

What does it take to resist in absolutely futile and overwhelming situations?

Inside of the Nazi concentration camps, places designed to eradicate all possibilities for resistance, inmates organized, sabotaged, and reflexively fought back against their oppressors. Within each of these stories we can find a simmering spirit of anarcho-nihilism, a tendency that challenges us to translate our feelngs of hopelessness into wild and joyous forms of attack.

Because even if we don't stand a chance, we refuse to be led to the slaughter like sheep.

$8

pistols drawn